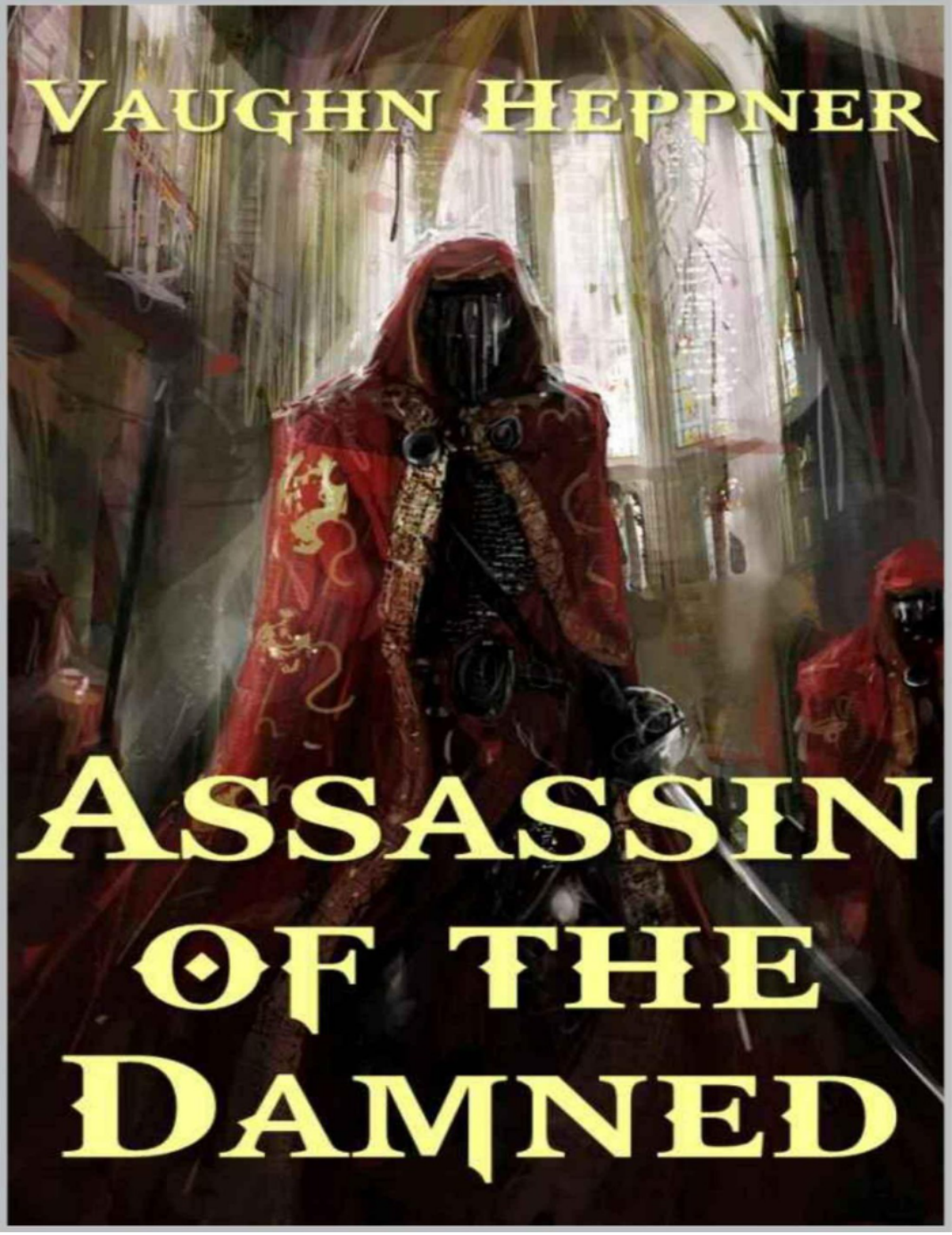
VAUGHN HEPPNER
ASSASSIN
OF THE
DAMNED

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

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Vaughn Heppner

Assassin of the Damned

— 1-

I groaned in agony as the hurled spear sank into my belly. I crashed back onto the tree stump altar. The bastards had chained me to it, although I'd managed to snap a rusty link, freeing an arm. It was one of the reasons they'd taken off running. I clutched the spear and dragged it out of my belly. Fiery pain lanced through me as I struggled to sit up.

In the moonlight, the cowards fled through the reeds. Some of them were hairy, a blasphemy against nature. The wretch I hated most wore priestly garments, a lapsed cardinal from Avignon.

I almost hurled the spear after them. Instead, as I sat upon the pagan altar, as blood poured out my belly, I feebly stabbed at the confining chains.

I was in a swamp. I had a throbbing knot on the back of my head. Erasmo della Rovere, the one-time priest, had clouted me from behind earlier. We had searched for deathbane together, a deadly flower of the swamp. While I was unconscious, the treacherous cur had chained me to this wooden altar.

I shuddered as coldness blossomed from my torn stomach. My strength oozed away with my blood. The spear fell from my fingers, clattered against the altar and thumped on the ground. I slumped back onto the tree stump so my chainmail harness clinked.

It was then I realized I was dying.

"No," I whispered. I kicked my legs, made the rusty links jangle.

What had Erasmo said before? The gloating wretch was from Perugia like me-Perugia of the mountains, in the Romagna, part of the Papal States in Italy. He'd told me he was going to….

I groaned. A terrible, numbing cold gripped my lungs. The coldness crept to my throat and turned my breathing into pitiful wheezes.

Erasmo had threatened my wife, my children, my city and my name. He said he'd discovered ancient, slumbering gods, dark deities of the past. He'd said my ancestry connected me to the evil pantheon, but I knew he lied. Erasmo was a child of the Devil.

My thoughts grew numb, and I found myself staring at the moon, at its pockmarked features. For a wild moment, I couldn't remember who I was or why I'd trekked into this foul swamp.

"I am Gian Baglioni," I whispered.

According to Erasmo, this hoary altar belonged to Old Father Night, one of those slumbering deities. Shaggy hangman trees with hunchbacked trunks leaned over me. They seemed like thirsty demons longing to drink my blood, to witness my death. Their branches

groaned in the wind. Their thin dark leaves rustled with seeming glee. They mocked my passing, laughed at my vain oaths.

I gnashed my teeth. Damn scheming Erasmo and his twisted plots- the priest had duped me. We used to be friends. I panted in loathing at the idea of dying here on this foul altar. Erasmo had tried to sacrifice my soul!

I swallowed in a dry throat and tried to concentrate. The moonlight shined painfully bright. Moonlight…the moon…Erasmo had taunted me about it. He'd said the moon was the reason…the reason-

I licked dry lips, squinted at the ancient white orb high in the heavens. Old Father Night hated the one represented by the moon. Erasmo had boasted about it. According to him, the dark deities, the slumbering ones, had once feuded bitterly. They'd sounded like Italian princes, each jealous of his or her prerogatives. I could understand that because I was the prince of Perugia.

The moon with its craters wavered strangely, or maybe my vision was failing. The pale moon seemed to take on the form of a woman's face, with a mocking and achingly seductive smile. I strained mightily and lifted a hand. I heard the rattle of a chain. My eyesight dimmed as I lay on the altar. Blood continued to pump out my ruined stomach.

"If you hate Erasmo," I wheezed, speaking to the moon or the one represented by it, "aid me. If you loathe Erasmo's master, drag me off this pagan stump."

The moon with its silvery light watched me with callous indifference. There were no dark deities. Erasmo had simply been a madman, a dupe of the Devil.

My strength failed. My hand dropped back beside me. I no longer heard the rustling leaves, the groans of wood. The world dimmed as one by one the stars began to fade. Only the silvery glare of the moon remained, my unblinking gaze focused on it.

I mumbled words that I cannot recall. I spoke them in haste, in fear and with hate. Finally, my words ceased and even the moonlight dimmed into darkness. There seemed to be motion and faraway sounds. I struggled to understand their meaning. I refused to die, to let Erasmo win. I summoned my will, and I recall a final shout. Maybe it was my voice, I no longer know. Then there was darkness, nothingness, a cessation of thought and maybe even life.

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Abruptly there was something, although it was faint. My thoughts sluggishly returned, or a portion of them did. It was as if I clung to a rope in a deep well. Someone high above cranked the handle that drew the rope out of a subterranean cavern. The handle turned and turned. I heard its creak. No, the creaks sounded like branches. Yes,

thousands of leaves rubbed together. Wind moaned. A new sensation bloomed. It was a feathery feeling. It brought another sense: that I was. The feathery feeling-something crawled across my cheek.

My eyes snapped open. A beetle parted its shell and flew off my face. I lay on my back under the stars. Tall grass waved beside me. Stars…they appeared behind thousands of shimmering leaves. Then it came to me: I no longer lay on the altar but on the cold ground. I grinned fiercely, I know not why. The grinning moved my mouth and moved something in it. The something *clicked* against my teeth. I clamped my teeth onto the metallic thing. It was round, flat, with tiny ridges along the edge. It was a…a coin. I angrily spat it out. The coin tumbled past my cheek and thudded beside my ear on the grass.

Why had a coin been in my mouth?

Fear lanced through my chest. Peasants in backwoods regions put a coin in a corpse's mouth so he or she could pay the ferryman. It was a pagan custom from olden times. In a moment, anger replaced the fear. That was a foul trick.

I tried to sit up, and failed. Something held me fast. I tried to move my arms. They were also stuck as if tied down by ropes. Alarmed, I turned my head. I still wore my chainmail harness, but it had horribly rusted. Many times worse, however, tall blades of grass sprouted through the individual links. Together, the many blades of grass interwoven through my mail held me down like a thousand fingers.

How long had I lain here for grass to grow up through the armor?

I tried to surge up, but the combined blades of grass held me down, although my head lifted. Grass even grew through my leggings. The tallest blades fluttered in the breeze.

I bellowed and wrenched my right arm with fierce strength. Grasses tore and roots pulled out of the ground. I yanked harder, freeing my right arm. Soon, I ripped my other arm free and clawed at my sides, tearing more grass. I began wrenching my legs. Finally, with a feeling of triumph, I surged to my feet. I beat at my mail so it clinked as I knocked lodged dirt, roots and grass. I stamped the ground with my feet. Then I stopped, horrified. The grass where I'd lain was dead white.

Terror threatened to unman me. How could I have lain there so long the grass under me had died and yet I was still alive?

"I am alive," I said, in a hoarse voice, one that startled me.

The coin I'd spit out of my mouth glowed faintly with a silvery light. Shocked, I knelt and picked it up. It was the size of a florin, the standard coin of the merchants of Florence. The engraving on one side showed mountainous Perugia, with a prominent moon above the city.

I froze. I was Gian Baglioni, the prince of Perugia. I had an

enemy, Erasmo della Rovere. He had hurled a spear into my belly. I shook my head, not wanting to think about that just yet. While I had lain dying-at least, I'd thought I'd been dying-I'd spoken to the moon.

I looked up and through the leaves saw a smattering of stars. There was no moon this night. Something about the stars troubled me. I glanced around. I saw each indentation of bark on the nearest cypress trees. I frowned. It was night. At night, you needed a torch to see this well. I stared at the bark as dread stole my ability to move. This was vile sorcery. Yes, I'd been ensorcelled, possibly enslaved to a foul sorcerer or to one of Erasmo's dark deities.

I turned the coin. It showed an engraving of an achingly beautiful woman. She looked just like the lady in the moon I'd seen before… before passing out.

I clutched the coin. "Erasmo." I spoke his name with hatred, with the desire to slay. This was *his* doing. We had come to the swamp….

I couldn't remember why. I realized with a shock that I'd forgotten things.

Something tugged my hand. I frowned. It tugged again. I opened my hand. The coin…by some dark witchery it wanted me to go…to a place where I could gain help. That's what seemed to whisper in my mind.

My lips twisted into a sneer. This was witchery indeed, dark sorcery. Although I'd been ensorcelled so I could see at night like a demon, I still had my will. I was Gian Baglioni, the rightful prince of Perugia. The grass through my armor showed me I'd lain here for some time. Erasmo had long departed, of that I was certain. I wanted this spell taken from me. Therefore, I would allow the coin to tug me. Then…a fierce desire to right these hideous wrongs broke the loathing that had locked my limbs. I would free myself of sorcery, hunt down Erasmo and kill him.

Only then did I consider the spear. It had pierced my belly. Forcing myself to it, I inspected my mailcoat around my stomach. There was a tear in the middle of my gut. Much of the rust might have been dried blood. I reached around and fingered smashed links in the small of my back. The implications-the spear had gone completely through me-I leaped up and ran in a gibbering panic, sickened at the idea that I was already dead.

— 2-

Wet leaves slapped my face. Mud sucked at my boots and horror crawled up my spine. I was dead. Erasmo wielding a spear had stabbed me in the stomach so all my lifeblood had flowed out of me. The lady in the moon-this was all a lie of the Devil!

After a time, a question broke through my terror. I'd been a prince of Perugia. I'd spoken with scholars, had kept several in my court. They had taught me the art of reason. If I'd died, why wasn't I in Heaven…or in Hell?

Another leaf slapped my cheek. I tore the leaf from its branch and crushed it. I halted, released the crumpled leaf and watched it drop in the mud. I'd never seen the dead walk. I walked. I ran. How could I suppose…suppose that I was….dead?

I studied my gut. With dread, I pushed a finger through the mail and through the hole in the padding underneath. I kept pushing-and found my solid stomach underneath. There was no hole in me.

What did this mean?

Erasmo had spoken about dark deities who had once rules the Earth in olden times. The ex-priest had tried to sacrifice me on a wooden altar in order to gain power, among other things. I laughed hoarsely. Old gods, pagan altars-it was just another name for deviltry. My stomach was whole. Someone must have healed me. Then why had they put a coin in my mouth as if I'd been a corpse?

I stared at the coin, at the beauty with the mocking smile whose portrait was stamped on it. The coin still tugged my hand. I pressed a finger against my stomach. I could not deny this marvelous healing. For that, I was grateful. Yet I'd lain in the swamp long enough for grass to grow through my armor, and I saw at night like a demon. Had I been in an enchanted sleep? Minstrels told such tales.

I stared at the woman in the coin. Her beguiling smile seemed to promise me power. For a moment, she seemed alive, as if she watched me through the coin.

I clutched the coin to block her vision. I shook my head. I refused to let spells bewitch me. A cold, hard smile stretched my lips. I needed a sword, a horse and a lance. Then I would force this sorcery from me. I would gather my soldiers and scour Italy for Erasmo. Wherever he went, I would follow. Not the Devil or Erasmo's slumbering gods could save him from my wrath. And if he'd harmed my wife or my children-

I trudged through mud and in a rage swiped aside vines. It was time to leave this dismal swamp. Cypress trees grew thickly, and there was a large body of ooze to my left. The wind blew ripples across it. By its tug, the coin suggested I enter the ooze, the slimy water. I

waded into it and my foot slid in the mucky bottom. The slime was cold and soon soaked my leggings to the knees. When the slimy mud reached my groin, a coil like an octopus's tentacle rippled into view. The coil had scales like a lizard. I watched it transfixed.

I'd never heard of such a thing in Italy.

The vile creature or its tentacle disappeared. I longed for a sword or even a knife. This was a horrible place. Warily, I resumed my trek. It was like wading through blood pudding and soon the slime reached my ribs.

Cruel laughter rang out ahead. A scream followed and a sobbing plea.

I halted a moment and then grimly waded toward the sounds. I was sick of being alone and I wanted answers. For one, I wished to know how long I'd lain in the swamp. Maybe it was dangerous heading to these ruffians, but it was night. I was in muck, in a swamp. Who would suspect me to appear from this quarter? And I saw at night like a demon. That would give me an advantage.

They sounded like brigands, either outlaws or mercenaries. Bands of mercenaries had crossed the Alps from France. These bands practiced an evil style of warfare, looting, burning and ransoming whomever they could capture.

Another scream erupted. It was of awful pain, maybe the receiving of a death-wound.

"Now you know we're in earnest," a man said gruffly. He had an English accent and confirmed my suspicion that they were mercenaries.

I soon spied brightness through the leaves. A fire danced beyond a dense thicket. The thicket was on higher ground, protected by a muddy bank. As I neared, a frightened horse whinnied, sounding as if it smelled a wolf or bear, something to terrify it. I studied the thickets and their leaves. The fat leaves shivered as the wind blew toward the brigands. I glanced around, but spied nothing to frighten a horse, certainly no wolves or bears. What did the horse smell?

I pried a stone loose as I climbed up the bank. The stone was my only weapon. I crawled past weeds. Then, after a careful survey, I found space under a thicket. I crawled through dirt and pried away a twig that snagged on my chainmail. Soon I spied their fire through a screen of leaves.

The brigands wore mirror-bright breastplates and mail. Most mercenaries darkened their armor as the best means of defeating rust. I'd heard of the White Company, a vain band of Englishmen who ordered their pages to polish their armor until it reflected like mirrors. These mercenaries undoubtedly belonged to the White Company.

I counted three *lances*. Normally, a lance was a knight's spear. In

this instance, a lance was a military term for a particular number and type of soldiers. In our day, a lance was composed of a squire, a soldier or man-at-arms and a page. There were also two crossbowmen. Both cradled loaded weapons. The handful of men-at-arms had belted swords. Two wore helmets. Three circled the poor wretch at a stake. There was a second stake, with a slumped-over wretch tied to it. That one looked dead. The first man wore furs and a golden medallion.

The mercenary leader was big, had a red beard and wore iron gauntlets. He grinned at the staked man. “The only thing that matters now, signor, is whether you want to buy yourself back with one arm or two.”

Another brigand suggestively hefted an axe.

“Take my medallion,” the man at the stake sobbed. “Take it, it’s all I have. You have to believe me.”

A horse screamed, and it yanked at the reins tying it to a branch. Several nearby horses neighed wildly.

“What’s the matter with them?” the red-bearded leader shouted.

A page threw up his hands to show he had no idea.

The staked man decided he had courage after all and cackled in a strange manner. He had a forked beard. In the firelight with his sweaty features, he seemed like a devil.

The red-bearded leader turned to him with a scowl.

“This is an evil swamp,” the staked man declared. “An opening to the underworld lies near. The Forgotten Ones march out on cursed nights. The dead walk and capture the living.”

The frightened horse became shrill. Its eyes rolled and spit foamed at its mouth as it struggled to tear itself free.

“Maybe he’s right,” the brigand with the axe said nervously. “This place is bad luck.”

“Shut your mouth!” the red-bearded leader snarled. “The only bad luck will be his if he doesn’t pay his ransom.” He jerked a thumb at the staked man. “Settle the damn horse down!” he shouted at a page.

“The dead walk here!” the staked man shouted. “They’re drawn to murder and treachery. They come for you!”

The red-bearded leader whirled around and backhanded the staked man. “Do you think you’re clever? Do you think you can frighten Englishmen with your child’s tales?”

The staked man had glazed eyes. Blood trickled from his lip and into his forked beard. Yet he smiled.

A crossbowman knelt by the fire and nervously fed it twigs. With wide eyes, he stared into the darkness.

The staked man spat blood. Then he stared where I lay hidden in the thicket. I noticed his medallion. It was a heavy circle of gold. It showed a cloaked man. He silently mouthed words, seemed to aim the

words at me.

I climbed to my feet and bulled through the bush.

The horses went wild. Several neighed shrilly. One broke free. It whirled around and kicked at a page. The lad barely dodged. Then the horse screamed again and galloped away.

I hurled my stone. It clanged off the red-bearded leader's helmet. He staggered back. The crossbowman by the fire lurched upright, fumbled his weapon and pulled the trigger. I heard the *ka-chuck*. The bolt flashed past my head. It slapped leaves and disappeared into the darkness.

"You missed," I laughed. It was a horrible sound.

The effect on the hardened brigands startled me. They stared wide-eyed as the fire cast its lurid light. The second crossbowman deliberately lifted his weapon, aimed and fired. The bolt thrummed with power. His was an arbalest, a heavy crossbow that needed a pulley to load. The bolt slammed into my torso, rocked me, and smashed out my back.

I expected to crumple to my knees. I expected to vomit blood and curse them with my dying breath. Why had I been so foolish? By the stars, that hurt. I glanced at my torso. Something black leaked out. It was a trickle, a paint of color on several links. I'd expected a gush of blood, redder than satin.

The pain angered me. I strode at the crossbowman. He dropped his weapon and clawed for his dagger. The others watched spellbound. Maybe the staked man practiced magic that froze them-I now suspected that he was a sorcerer. The crossbowman drew his dagger, cried out and stabbed. I caught his wrist before he could stab me. Then I tore the dagger from his nerveless fingers and punched the blade through his chest-plate. He stared at me with incredulous eyes and crumpled, as I should have done earlier.

Pandemonium erupted. I thought the brigands would attack. Instead, they bolted in all directions. Some freed horses and managed to mount or drape themselves onto a horse's back. The rest charged into the forest on foot. It happened so fast that I failed to grab one for questioning. I glanced at my torso, at the wound. A little more blackness dripped out.

Why was my blood so sluggish and black? I wondered if the staked man would know. I turned toward him.

He wrestled with his bonds. It was a violent struggle, and somehow he freed an arm.

"Who are you, signor?" I asked.

His head whipped up, and his eyes went wide with fright as he stared at me.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said.

Horror twisted his features. There was none of his former cunning in evidence, none of his devilish features. He clawed at the rope on his left wrist, bloodying himself in his frenzy. Then he yanked the rope free and hurled it at me.

I snatched the rope out of the air.

He turned and ran.

“Wait!” I shouted, and took off after him.

His head twisted around so he glanced over his shoulder. As he spied me, he shrieked and ran like the proverbial deer. He smashed past leaves and grunted whenever heavy branches clawed him.

I used my arms to ward off the same branches. I sprinted, my rusty armor a jangle of noise, my muddy boots a thud of determination. In the open areas, I gained. In the thickets, he dodged with cunning desperation. He ran away from the swamp, away from the forest. Unfortunately for me, we entered an area heavy with brush.

I caught my last glimpse of him near dawn. Sweat drenched him and flattened his hair. He’d discarded his furs so the medallion flopped on his sweaty chest. He flung his arms into the air and screamed. It sounded like a desperate plea for me to leave him alone.

Soon, my steps grew sluggish. My thoughts blurred. Had he cast a spell? If so, why had it taken so long to harm me?

The sun peeked over the horizon. Sight of the dazzling light struck me numb. Then I was falling…and I knew no more.

— 3-

A lady stood over me. She wore a flowing, silvery dress, sheer enough to hint at the wonderful curvatures underneath. She had dark curls, hot eyes and that beguiling smile. It was the lady in the moon, so perfectly beautiful that it was frightening. I lay on a slab of stone in darkness. An archway to my left glowed with a fiery red and there were roaring sounds like a mighty furnace.

She held a bow stave. It might have been ivory. Strange designs twined about it. She thrust the stave hard against my ribs.

"You're late," she said. "And now you dally, playing foolish games."

The blow against my ribs made me snarl at the pain. I struggled to rise. If I could, I would tear that stave from her hands and swat her backside. No one thrashed Gian Baglioni as if I were a common serf.

She ignored my feeble efforts, and I wondered at my weakness. She tapped my chest with the stave.

"My patience has limits, signor. You've already slumbered far too long. Old Father Night has gained a march on me, maybe two or three. His minions abound."

She tapped my chest harder.

I gingerly touched my ribs from the first blow and felt to see if any were broken.

"You're not the Darkling," she said, "not yet. So these heroics must cease. Hurry to the castle. Neither my patience nor my strength is unlimited-unless it is that you wish to return as you were."

"Erasmo…" I whispered.

A frown creased her brow. It destroyed the image that she was a young maiden. It also caused her eyes to shine dangerously. They were strangely silver and molten with threatening power.

"You're late," she said. "Now you must hurry."

She began to fade as the red glow from the arch increased its hellish hue. The roaring sounds grew. Then fear tore at me. From out of the darkness shuffled a naked man. Dirt dribbled from his grimy hair. He shuffled toward the arch and his eyes were blank and his face stiff like a mask. I struggled to rise. I strained with all my feeble strength. The shuffling man looked like me.

I called out hoarsely. It didn't matter. He or I shuffled toward the arch, toward the red glow that roared with a fierce fire. He shuffled toward what seemed certain doom.

— 4-

A jolt woke me. My eyelids fluttered. I heard a creature snort. It sounded like a mule or a horse.

"Easy now," a woman said. "It's all right." Leather snapped. Reins, I suppose. I had the feeling she wasn't talking to me.

There was a second jolt and creaky wood. My body swayed, bumped about. Others bumped against me. Metal squealed below. These were wagon sounds. I cracked open an eye. I lay on someone. There were more bodies around me. None moved. They were dead.

Rage, fear and indignity battled within me.

A wheel lurched into a pothole. A dead hand rose and slapped my face. I dragged an arm free, the one pinned under a cold body.

"Mistress," a heavy voiced man said. He sounded worried. I think he sat on the wagon's buckboard.

"What's wrong?" the woman asked.

I waited for his answer, but got pregnant silence instead. My neck prickled. It was an overpowering sensation. I rolled aside. A club smashed flesh where my head had been. I opened my eyes. I lay on my back. Stars twinkled in the night sky. Leaves bordered the edges of my vision. A head appeared upside-down. The head had a bowl-cut of thick hair, vacant eyes and a mashed nose. His club rose into sight. I rolled the other way. The club thudded onto a skull that cracked.

"It's fast," he shouted.

"Kill it!" the woman screamed. "We can't let it get away now."

I flipped onto my belly and butted my head into the man's stomach. He grunted, although his gut-muscles were stiff.

"Kill it!" the woman screamed.

The man flailed and the club thudded against the small of my back. His angle was bad, however. My chainmail and padding were good. I grappled with him. He was big, but so was I.

"Help!" he shouted. He had awful breath.

I wrapped my arms around his torso and jutted the top of my head against his chin. He beat at me. I laughed and tightened my hold so his ribs creaked.

"You're killing him!" the woman screamed. "Let him go. Let him go."

I let go, staggered back and shot a fist into his face. His head snapped back with a crack and he catapulted to the buckboard. He flipped over it, crashed against the pole connecting the wagon to the mules and flopped onto the ground. The wagon passed over him before the woman yanked the reins and shouted at the mules to stop. She lit off the wagon and ran to him. He twitched on the country

road. Then he sighed heavily and seemed to deflate.

I jumped down with a jangle of noise.

The woman's head snapped up as she stared at me. She wore a hooded smock and breeches like a man, with boots. She had a flat face with hard eyes and could have been a whore. She had the mercenary feel, a person who knew the underbelly of life. The law said that a whore, a harlot, was supposed to dangle a red cord from her shoulders. Where was hers?

"You killed him," she said.

The force of my blow surprised me. "Why did you want him to kill me?" I growled.

She shook the man's shoulder. I suppose to make sure he was truly dead. Then she eased away from him, away from me and jumped up. I took three quick strides and caught an arm. She squealed, whipped out a knife, a Venetian *poniard*. I slapped it out of her hand.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Ofelia. Please don't kill me."

Although she cowered, I caught her eyeing the knife lying on the road. I pulled her from it.

"How did I get in your wagon?" I asked.

"…Ox put you in."

"Who?"

She indicated the dead man.

I scowled. "Why would he put me into a wagon full of corpses?"

She bit at her lower lip like a cat toying with a mouse. "We thought you were dead."

"I'm not dead," I snarled. "I've been ensorcelled."

Ofelia cackled nervously and dared look up, with fear in her eyes. She had pockmarks around her mouth. "Can you blame us, signor? You have caked hair, a deathly pallor and many puncture-holes in your rusty armor. You even lacked a heartbeat, or none I could feel. You ought to be glad we didn't bury you."

I shook her harder. "You'd be dead if you'd tried to bury me."

"Please, signor," she whimpered. "Will you loosen your grip? I swear I won't run away."

I pushed her toward the wagon. "Why did Ox try to smash my head?"

She massaged her arm. "I pick up the dead, signor. I deliver them…to the magistrates. There's a plague. But this you surely know. Sometimes we make mistakes. We pick up the dying. They're going to be dead soon enough. Ox taps them, makes it easier on the suffering."

"Who are these magistrates?" I asked.

Her eyes turned shifty. "You are a knight, I presume."

I grunted.

“A knight or a luckless mercenary,” she said. “It matters not to me. With Ox gone I will need help unloading the bodies.” She jerked her chin at the wagon. “The wages are good-better than soldiering, I’d warrant.”

I scowled. Did she think me a fool?

“Look at your attire,” she said. “I suggest you forget about your chivalry, signor, and dirty your hands with some simple labor. I’ll pay you one hundred florins.”

The outrageous offer and her amazing gall stilled my retort. Ten florins would have been too much. She must believe as Cecco Angiolieri of Siena did when he wrote, “Florins are the best of kin.”

Blood brothers and cousins true,
Father, mother, sons, and daughters, too;
Kinfolk of the sort no one regrets,
Also horses, mules and beautiful dress.
The French and the Italians bow to them,
So do noblemen, knights, and learned men.
Florins clear your eyes and give you fires,
Turn to facts all your desires
And into all the world’s vast possibilities.
So no man say, I’m nobly born, if
He have not money. Let him say,
I was born like a mushroom in obscurity and wind.

“We’ll be at the castle in less than an hour,” Ofelia said. “With one hundred florins you can repair your mail, buy a sword, a chest plate, a horse and hire a courtesan. That will surely put the life into you.”

Her jest sharpened my suspicions. She did not react normally. None of this was normal. I wanted a sword so I could run it through Erasmo. His treachery had brought me to this perplexing state. I frowned, glanced at her wagon. Had I fallen along the side of a road earlier? What had happened to the man I’d been chasing?

“Why does the lord of the castle want corpses?” I asked.

“Lady,” she said.

“What?”

“She’s a lady, not a lord.”

I thought of the lady etched on my coin. I’d thought of her in my dream. “What is the lady’s name?”

“…She does not enjoy her name being bandied about,” Ofelia said. “You must ask her yourself, if you will be so good as to help me.”

“You have bold tongue,” I said, “especially for someone who just tried to murder me.”

“I told you it was a mistake. I’ll double the wage-I beg your pardon, signor. I am a lowly person. I will give you a gift of one hundred florins if you will help me. Or, if you prefer, you may consider this a chivalrous act. You slew my helper. Now I am in distress and I am a woman.”

“You’re taking his death easily enough,” I said.

“…For that you must thank the plague, signor. Death is everywhere.” Ofelia glanced at the dead lout and crossed herself in a haphazard fashion.

That angered me. “If the corpses are worth so much, maybe I’ll take your wagon and drive to the castle myself.”

She looked scared, and upset. “The lady is…particular, signor, and she’s powerful enough so it matters. It would be a foolish thing for you to steal my dead.”

The strange dream earlier asserted itself. It had seemed more than a dream. The lady in it had hit me and given me orders. I objected to both. And the thought occurred that if the lady could plague me with strange dreams she might continue to do so. No. It was the Baglioni way to attack trouble, not run from it. This wagon of corpses, I think it headed to the place where my coin had tugged me. According to many minstrels’ tales, one way to break an enchantment was to slay the sorcerer or sorceress. I would not permit anyone to bewitch me or plague my dreams.

I glanced at the dead lout on the road. Despite the right of self-defense, it had not been my intent to kill Ox. I hefted him and laid his corpse in the wagon. I noticed shovels on the sides, two of them. Clods were scattered in the wagon. Wet clay clung to each shovel-blade.

Did Ofelia rob graveyards? Why would anyone want corpses that badly? Were there any good reasons? Pope John XXII had issued a prohibition against alchemy in the year 1317. Surely, that ban included sorcerous experiments on the dead.

I climbed onto the buckboard with Ofelia. The mules eyed me. The bigger one twitched its ears. I had the feeling they distrusted me. Ofelia shook the reins and the mules lurched into movement.

— 5-

It galled me I couldn't remember more. Erasmo and I had waded into a swamp called Avernus as we'd searched for deathbane. Unfortunately, I could no longer remember the reason why I had done this. The swamp had an evil reputation and it lay in Tuscany. More than that…. I think the awful spear wound and later the sorcery practiced on me had locked away much of my memory.

The coin felt heavy in my belt then. It seemed to whisper to me, telling me I could regain my memories from the lady. The idea made me thoughtful.

Ofelia watched me sidelong for much of the ride. Presently, the wagon creaked past oak trees and up and down gently rolling hills. This fruitful region lay in the western curve of the Apennines Mountains from Salerno north to La Spezia. The Pontine Marshes were to our south. We rode where the low coastal plains began to merge into the higher pastures and hills of Tuscany and Umbria. A lantern swayed from a post and cast an eerie light around us. Ofelia licked her lips and drew a breath. Before she could speak-if she had been about to-a horn faintly blared in the distance. She sat straighter and listened carefully.

I heard distant baying of a discordant kind. Ofelia must have too. Her dirt-caked hands tightened on the reins. She muttered a curse, and she worried her lower lip.

"There's a reason you cart your corpses at night," I said.

"These are bad times, signor."

"Who sounds the hunting horn?" I asked.

"No one hunts me," she said.

"Not yet, you mean."

"If you must know, signor," she said, baring her teeth. "There are…brigands out there as nasty as you. Only they have swords, horses and hounds."

I thought about Erasmo. "Who's their lord?"

Ofelia glanced at me with speculation. "You're a knight or a mercenary. What say I hire you?"

I scowled, tired of her presumptions.

"Hire your sword," she said. "By the moon, you're prickly."

I snapped around. "Why do you curse by the moon?"

She shifted her legs, maybe so she could spring away. "Are you one of them?" she asked tiredly. She shook her head. "You're a fool to think you can slip into the castle like this and kill her."

"What are you talking about?"

Her shifty look returned-then suspicion. I felt as if she fanned

options like tarots. Finally, she turned her head and spat, and glanced at me. “That’s what I think about Old Father Night.”

How did she know the name of the one the lady in my dream had spoken about? For reasons I couldn’t explain, the name seemed linked with the cloaked man medallion I’d seen last night. This was yet more sorcery, more intrigue. I grew thoughtful.

“You chose this delivery-night for a reason,” I said.

Ofelia worried her lower lip and glanced at me sidelong.

“I met a man with a golden medallion,” I said. “Some mercenaries had caught him.”

Her head whipped about. “What happened to him? Tell me!”

I scowled at her presumption, but I felt elated that perhaps I could learn now what occurred. I told her what had happened between the White Company mercenaries, the staked man and me.

“The cur!” she cried, startling me. Her eyes blazed like a rat cheated of booty. “I knew he’d get greedy. He can never just do a task. He always has to try to milk more.” She rapped a fist against her forehead, shook her head and asked in a quieter voice, “He killed the other one, though? Tell me you know he killed that one.”

Yes, there had been two of them. One slumped in death at his stake, with his throat cut. Then the import of her words hit home. “You hired White Company mercenaries?” I asked. She, a grave robber had done this?

She shrugged. “I believe in buying excellence over cheaper shoddy goods. At least, I thought they were the best killers around. I suspected the captain was a braggart.”

“The big red-bearded one?” I asked.

She nodded. “That’s the captain. Da Canale. He calls himself an Englishmen, but I know his mother was born in Pisa.”

“Why did you want the man with the medallion killed?”

“Magi Filippo?” she asked, and she bared her teeth. “If you punch him like you did Ox, I’ll give you a thousand florins.”

Where did a grave robber acquire such amounts? Instead of unraveling mysteries, I gained new ones. “Why do you want this Filippo killed?” I asked.

Ofelia’s features hardened. “…I knew him once. He was my papa’s apprentice. My papa was an eel-fisher. That was before the dying, before everything began changing. Magi Filippo he calls himself now. Ha! He wears his medal, his magician’s badge. He’s set himself against honest laborers. He stops those he can from reaching the castle, me for one. Does he begrudge me florins? He used to seek my favors freely enough in the old days.”

This was an old wound, it seemed.

“Lord High and Mighty Filippo says his master set him the task,”

Ofelia sneered. “He fancies himself the master around here. The things he’s done with that pendant-bah! I knew that despite his newfound power that Filippo was always careless. Papa said it all the time, and he always beat Filippo for it. People say the English soldiers are swift. That’s how they storm castles and the smaller walled towns, and how they capture over-confident nobles and merchants. I convinced the captain he could ambush Filippo unawares. It’s good they slew the other one and cut his throat. In some ways he was even worse than Filippo.”

She shot me a venomous glance. “The captain had him tied, you say. Filippo was as good as dead then until you showed up. You spoiled everything. My only joy is that Filippo will kill you or worse before he finishes with me.”

I gave her a vicious grin. I’d seen this Filippo run screaming from me. As long as I kept from looking at his evil medallion, I had no fear of him.

Ofelia rubbed her chin. “I’m intent on hiring your sword, signor.”

This grave robber had gall, but she also had courage. I liked that, and I could use the florins. My rusty mail-could I trust it? Even with the mail, I was woefully under-armored. The crossbow earlier had proven that. Normally, over the mail, I buckled on a chest plate and a skirt of linked hoops. I needed arm and leg plate, and a ten-pound helmet with visor. Then I needed an armored warhorse, a heavy lance, several battle swords and a good axe. One poet had called us knights, “A terrible worm in an iron cocoon.” The “worm” implied how we devoured everything in our path, more in our search of money than actual fire and mayhem. These days, knights, squires and men-at-arms marched in a prince’s host less because of feudal obligations than for pay in florins. Hence, someone as lowly as this grave robber could believe her coins would purchase my aid. Yet there was a singular problem.

I told Ofelia, “First I would *need* a sword.”

“Whoa,” Ofelia said. When the wagon stopped, she climbed in back and threw aside a tarp. Several swords and daggers lay there, probably stolen from smashed caskets. “Take your pick, signor. Just help me reach the castle.”

“You said Filippo has horses, hounds and swords.”

“I saw you punch Ox,” she said. “He was the strongest man I knew. You manhandled him like a child. By your story, you chased off White Company killers. I will tell you a secret. I’ve a trick that will surprise Magi Filippo. Kill him and the others will scatter. That I know for certain.”

I nodded. “First tell me who the lady in the castle is.”

“She’s particular about that sort of-”

“No more excuses,” I said. “If you want my help, you must speak.”

Ofelia scratched her scalp. Under her hood, she had bristles for hair. “Have you heard, signor, of the Moon Lady?”

I shrugged.

“A priestess of the Moon lives at the castle,” Ofelia said.

“What does a priestess of the Moon want with so many corpses?”

“What do I care?” Ofelia asked. “She pays in silver. That’s enough for me.”

“My sword will cost you fifteen hundred florins.”

Ofelia began to protest.

“You tried to kill me,” I said. “And so far I’ve refrained from hanging you for it.”

She grew pale, nodded.

I climbed into the wagon-bed and picked up a sword. It had the stamp of Villani, one of the best smithies in Milan, which was the arms and armor capital of Italy. The sword wore specks of rust, probably from laying in damp ground too long. A rusty sword for a knight with rusty mail-maybe it was fitting. I felt enlivened with a blade in my hand. I was ready to deal vengeance and gain justice, be it from a priest, sorcerer or slumbering goddess.

Ofelia snapped the reins and the mules lurched into motion.

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We hit a stretch of open road and passed dark vineyards. There was a cottage down in the ravine, with light shining past the door jam. The mules pulled at a steady clop and their heads bobbed up and down. Soon we crested the hill. More appeared in the distance.

"There," Ofelia said. She pointed at a castle on a crag. It was dark, and even from here, the castle radiated menace. It was too tall and spiky, like an evil castle in a minstrel's tale.

"Don't the guards carry lanterns?" I asked.

Ofelia's laugh sounded like a witch's cackle.

The road led down and looked to twist in the ravines. I spied lights of movement among trees. Our friends carried lanterns or torches.

"How many men will Filippo have?" I asked.

"We could only wish they were men," Ofelia muttered.

Hounds howled before I could ask her what she meant. The howling was eerie, discordant, as I'd said earlier. A premonition touched me and I realized the improbability of Ofelia's tale. I put my hand on her shoulder. She cowered, and I felt her flesh tremble.

"Is this a trap?"

She shook her head.

"By the howls Filippo must have half-a-dozen hounds and likely a dozen riders," I said. "I can kill two or three of his men-at-arms. The rest will swarm me and capture you. You must realize that. I don't think you'd willingly ride into capture. That leaves only one other option."

"All you have to do is kill Filippo," she said. "Surely you know that."

"Slay him while his men guard him?" I laughed.

"Knock them out of the way. You're strong."

"My dear woman, horses are too big to knock out of the way."

"I hired you-your sword, I mean. I did it honestly, signor. I want to reach the castle. Why would I jeopardize my wagon and cargo just so Filippo could kill you? You're nothing to me."

I scowled.

"How was I supposed to know you'd wake up?" she asked. "The way you lay beside the road earlier, Ox and I thought you were dead. Filippo was out there before that. There would be no means for Filippo and me to plan a trap, if that's what you fear."

Her reasoning made sense, and her blatant greed and self-interest were too honest to fake. I released her.

She rubbed her shoulder, glanced at me. "The priestess gave me a

powder, signor. It makes a flash that blinds people in the dark, at least for a few moments. You can attack then."

"Right," I said. "Move in among horsemen."

"Are you jesting?" she said. "I'd flee, but you're quicker than a stoat and would catch me. You can kill them."

"Run and leave your precious cargo?" I asked.

"You evaded Ox's club," she said, "twice. You caught me on the road when I tried to run. You must know your own quickness, signor. Combined with your great strength-and with my powder-Filippo's as good as dead."

I recalled the White Company mercenaries. Had I dodged the first crossbow bolt? I'd moved among them as if they'd stood spellbound, and I'd snatched the knife out of the second crossbowman's hand. I pressed a hand against my chest and poked a finger where the crossbow bolt had torn into chainmail. The flesh underneath was whole and the ribs intact. Yet the bolt had pierced my body and I'd leaked a black fluid.

My scowl deepened. I could see in the dark. I moved as fast as a stoat. I hit like a bull, and now I could heal like a lizard, one that regrows its tail.

"I have a plan, signor," Ofelia said as she graced me with a rat-like grin. "My papa taught me to always have a plan." The wagon creaked along a ravine thick with brush. "Magi Filippo has seen you. I'm sure you frightened him. He might be too cautious to step into our trap if he spies you here."

"You want me to lay in the wagon with the dead?" I asked.

"No. I think you should drape Ox's cloak over your armor. Hunch as Ox always did. Keep silent when they ride up, for Ox seldom spoke. When I kick you, close your eyes. I'll toss the powder. Trust me, signor. You'll know the flash went off. That is when you draw your sword."

It was simple, and it played on Filippo's likely expectations. But could I trust this grave robber? Could I trust my strength and speed to slay Filippo? How did I know the others would scatter at his death? What if they wore plate, wore all the armor a knight should?

A horn blared. It was loud, arrogant and close.

I hurried into the wagon-bed and tore away Ox's hooded cloak. Soon I sat on the buckboard with my flimsy disguise. I was barely in time.

They came out of a clump of trees, the hounds first. They were vile creatures. I hadn't expected it. How could I? The hounds were elongated men who ran on their hands and feet. They were naked and their backs were high off the ground. Their eyes bulged and some had fangs instead of teeth. One of them bayed. The others panted and

loped toward us.

"What are they?" I whispered in horror.

"Damned creatures," Ofelia whispered, "who ran afoul of the Lord of Night."

"Who?" I whispered.

She shot me an incredulous glance.

Horsemen thundered into view. The riders were big, wore flapping cloaks and hoods. Fortunately, none clinked with mail or clanked with plate. Even with my demonic vision, it was hard to see their faces. Several of the riders seemed to have snouts like beasts. I felt then as if I'd ridden into the first canto of Dante's *Inferno*. I believe I was as terrified and horrified as when Dante first called out to eerie-voiced Virgil.

I barely remembered in time Ofelia's plan. I hunched on the buckboard, kept my head down. The rusty, Villani-forged sword lay at my feet.

"Halt!" a man shouted. I thought I recognized his voice.

Ofelia drew rein. We creaked to a stop, swayed. Horses neared. Torches hissed and threw flickering light.

I peered out of my hood. Magi Filippo, the supposed eel-fisher's apprentice, rode in the lead on an elegant Arabian horse. He held a torch and had a feline smile that oddly matched his forked beard. His pendant thumped against a leather jerkin. He must have been proud of the pendant or maybe it was the symbol of his authority. Behind him followed big riders. One of them gazed at me. Torchlight reflected out of his eyes as if he was a wolf. I shuddered, and wondered what had occurred to turn men into creatures and creatures into men.

The altered hounds snarled up at us and gnashed their teeth. In some, I spied a muted light of humanity. Those seemed as mournful as savage, as if they understood their degradation.

"Ofelia," Filippo said in an oily tone. "This is a wonderful surprise. What? No words for your old friend? Ofelia. I thought we had an agreement. I let you enter the castle. You-"

"You always planned me treachery," she said nervously. I had the feeling she tried hard not to glance my way. In spite of my horror, I wondered what treachery she had in store for me.

Filippo laughed. "Planning is one thing, doing is another. But if you do it, you must succeed. You failed to succeed when you sent the White Company killers after me."

"I've kept my bargain," she whined.

Filippo eased the Arabian closer, and his features turned ugly. "That was a nasty bit of business, setting the captain and his men on me. Did you really think-"

Ofelia nudged me with her foot. I barely remembered to close my

eyes and turn my head. Her garments rustled as if she threw something. I heard a hiss and a violent explosion that made me cringe. Horses screamed, riders shouted and hounds howled.

My fear boiled into rage. With a bellow, I grabbed the sword and leaped from the moving buckboard-the mules bolted. I had a moment to wonder if Ofelia had calculated that in her plans.

With a jarring thud, I crashed into Filippo. The Arabian reared. We tumbled. I twisted Filippo under me. He struck the ground first and bones crunched. The impact blew me off him. I rolled, found I'd kept hold of the sword and sprang to my feet. Riders shouted wildly and clawed at their eyes. Horses screamed and turned in circles. Filippo tried to get up as he worked his mouth like a landed carp. I hacked once and finished him. It was brutal and sudden, the usual way of war.

At his death, riders lurched in the saddle as if wasps had stung them. The altered hounds howled like damned souls and fled. Maybe Ofelia had spoken truly about just having to kill Filippo. Still, I distrusted her. So I used my advantage, the sighted among the temporarily blinded. I lunged here and there and used the tip of my sword. I stabbed at vital spots. Even so, four riders galloped away.

I tried to grab a horse. I would catch Ofelia. Each time I neared an animal, it bolted in terror. They must have smelled the stink of sorcery upon my person.

I knelt beside one of the fallen riders and forced myself to inspect him. He had a pushed out mouth and nose, like the beginning of a snout. He seemed human otherwise, which is to say that the transformation was all the more hideous. I could only conclude that he had bargained his soul and had begun to melt into a demon. Either that, or instead of me being Dante and entering the land of the dead and the demons of Hell, they had somehow found a means onto the Earth. The thought made me back away. I glanced at others. They were the same. Each had a badge pinned to his chest that showed a cloaked man. Did that make them servants of this Old Father Night? One thing made me glad. Each of those lying on the road was dead.

I dared crouch beside Filippo and examined the gold chain. I let my hand hover over the pendant. Repugnance filled me. I wanted nothing to do with the foul gold. Let it tempt another.

I stood. Ofelia's wagon was gone. I cleaned my sword, sheathed it and set out for the castle. If I'd been ensorcelled, would my face begin to push outward into a snout? Were Erasmo's dark deities indeed real? I touched my face. It seemed normal. Even so, I lengthened my stride. I would force these spells from me or I would wreck Perugian vengeance upon the caster.

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To my surprise, I found Ofelia a quarter mile later. The right rear wheel had spun off her wagon. That corner of the wagon touched the road. Ofelia had unhitched the mules and tied their reins to branches. She had one end of a pole under the wagon, with wood under the pole to make it a lever. Her lantern-light cast the pathetic scene in a yellow glow. Ofelia grunted and pulled. It appeared as if she wanted to lift the wagon corner and kick a piece of wood under it. She would have to lever it many times to get all her wood under. Only then could she think about wrestling the wheel back onto the axle.

She sweated, grunted and cursed with crude profanity. And suddenly with a crack of wood, her lever splintered. She sprawled backward onto the road.

"You should have unloaded the corpses first," I said.

She yelped, jumped up and waved a trembling knife in my direction. From under her hood, she squinted into the darkness as if I was invisible.

I strode into the lantern's radius. "The wagon's too heavy," I said.

Terror twitched across her pockmarked face. The knife shook worse. She looked at it, shrugged, sheathed the knife and tried to smile. It was the most insincere smile I'd ever seen.

"I wager you won the fight," she said.

"Do you want their corpses?" I asked.

She forced a chuckle and nodded as if she appreciated my humor. "Did you slay them all?"

I shook my head.

Worry pulled at her mouth. "Please tell me you killed Filippo."

"Was he truly a sorcerer?" I asked.

"Was?" She smiled. "That means he's dead, right?"

Ofelia was clever. "When I killed him," I said, "the others reacted oddly."

"They're bonded to him. They're creatures of the Lord of Night."

I wondered if 'the Lord of Night' was a nickname for the Devil. "Was Magi Filippo a creature of this lord?" I asked.

Ofelia clapped her hands in delight. "He's dead. Oh, he's finally dead. What wonderful news."

"Is the Lord of the Night the Devil?"

"You're not truly asking me that," she said with a laugh.

"Why not?"

"Because everyone knows about the Lord of Night. Peasants in Ireland know. The lord is as human as the two of us…well, as me. He brought the Great Mortality. He *changed* the world. Why pretend you

don't know?"

"Tell me about this Great Mortality."

Ofelia laughed. "Where have you been that you can ask me that?"

"Explain," I said.

She nodded and with one of her grubby hands, she wiped away her smile. "I'm sorry I fled, signor. But how would it have helped if I'd stayed? You said some of them escaped. They might have kidnapped me. This way I'm still free to pay you the thousand florins."

"Fifteen hundred," I said.

"You earned every coin of it, signor. That was a knightly leap. I turned back to watch. I should have halted the mules, I know. But by the time I turned to control them, the mules had their heads. They were terrified. It was all I could do to keep the wagon intact. These cursed potholes are everywhere. I would have escaped but for them. When the wheel came off, I pitched off the wagon. But I was a juggler before this and remembered my tumbles."

"Bravo," I said.

"I hope you're not bitter."

"What? That you're a treacherous ingrate?"

"I explained that, signor," she said, sounding wounded.

I nodded. "Good night to you, madam. I wish you luck." I began to stride past. I'd had enough of her.

She watched, surprised. "Wait, signor."

I saluted the uneasy mules as I passed. Then I strode along the road, headed for the castle.

"You owe me!" Ofelia shouted.

I paused, looked back. "…Do you have rope?"

"Rope?" she asked.

I looked at the trees. "Ten feet should be enough to hang you."

"What?"

"I owe you for Ox's attempted murder of me."

"That's ridiculous. Consider, signor, you'll never get your fifteen hundred florins if I'm not with you."

"You never offered in good faith."

"It was my powder that allowed you to attack successfully."

"Magi Filippo hunted you," I said. "I was never in danger."

She shook her head. "He hunted anyone who neared the castle. He would have come for you. You saw his hounds, the luckless men twisted by sorcery. You must have seen the others. They hate us."

"Us?"

"Those who are still human," Ofelia said. "Those they capture are hideously treated. You would have been no exception."

I pondered that. I liked the idea of sorcery twisting them better than the idea they were escapees from Hell. Besides, Dante's *Inferno*

had made it clear that none escaped from the infernal abyss. Priests and bishops taught the same thing.

Ofelia approached with the lantern. Hooded cunning creased her face despite her efforts to hide it. “Where is Filippo’s chain?”

She was observant, this little grave robber. “It’s on his corpse,” I said.

“No. You should have taken it. Please tell me you took it.”

“The gold is cursed,” I said.

She laughed as if I were a cretin. “The gold is fine. It’s the pendant that is cursed, and that’s why you should have taken it. You’re in danger now.”

“Less than before, I’d warrant.”

“You can mock if you like,” she said. “But that shows your ignorance.”

I refused to let her goad me. “I bid you goodbye.” I bowed, began to turn away.

“The medallion showed the Cloaked Man, one of the manifestations of Old Father Night. The riders that escaped will return to the battle site. They’ll take the medallion. They’ll wrap Filippo’s corpse in a shroud and take it to his master.”

“Why should that trouble me?” I asked.

“Filippo’s master is the Lord of Night. By sorcerous means the medallion will show him Filippo’s death. It will show him you. The Lord of Night will want revenge.”

Ah. I saw the depth of her cunning then. It was something that would have been worthy of that viper Bernabo Visconti of Milan or Pope Clement VI in Avignon. She’d obviously wanted *me* to murder Filippo so *she* could escape the coming retribution from his master the Lord of Night.

“When the Lord of Night arrives with his minions,” I said, “I’ll tell him you hired me to murder Filippo. This lord will come and seek you then as the author of Filippo’s death.”

“No,” Ofelia said. “You’re too strange to pass over. The Lord of Night or his avenging minion will take you. You need protection, signor. You need a patron.”

“And how has your patron helped you?” I asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Ofelia asked, surprised. “She sent you.”

The silver coin suddenly felt heavy in my belt.

“Four riders are still out there,” Ofelia said, indicating the woods, “four riders and the hounds.”

“Let them come.”

“If you leave,” Ofelia said, “they might capture me.”

I shrugged.

“They’ll question me concerning you. I’ll be forced to talk. I think

there are things about you, you want kept secret."

I lacked the knowledge to know if she was right or not. Prudence dictated I see this little grave robber to the Moon Lady's castle or I should kill her now to silence her lying tongue.

She gave me another of her insincere smiles.

I was not a Visconti viper or a scheming pope. I had no desire to stamp a rat, or at least not stamp this rat with its scrabbling thirst for life. I would not kill Ofelia.

"Do you not believe me, signor?" she asked.

Ofelia had used her magic powder to help me slay Filippo. The man and his creatures might have attacked me. That was true. She had given me a good sword and she yet owed me florins, a goodly sum of them.

"You may join me," I said.

"What about my wagon?"

"I'm in a hurry," I said. "Leave it."

Ofelia worried her lower lip. "You don't understand, signor. It was hard work collecting the dead. They're worth money."

Her collection of the dead suddenly sickened me. The many webs of witchery around me were enraging. I longed to slash them with a sword or burn them out with fire. I told her, "Your life is worth more than a wagon of corpses."

"You're strong," Ofelia said, "supernaturally so. Why not lift the edge of the wagon so I can put the wheel back on?"

"You dare to mock me?" I shouted.

She cringed before my anger. Then hounds howled in the distance. We both turned toward the sound. The hounds kept silent after that, so we couldn't tell if they retreated or advanced.

With her sweaty features, Ofelia looked up at me with hope and with her grave-digging avarice. "Try to lift it," she pleaded. "Try it once. If it works-I'll double my offer."

Three thousand florins-the idea was madness. Yet there was something in her voice…she knew more than she said. I didn't want to believe that I was supernaturally strong. Yet something strange had happened to me. I strode to the wagon. "Get the wheel ready," I said hoarsely.

Ofelia scrambled to it.

I squatted and wondered why I played along with her madness. Then I grabbed the corner of the wagon and made sure I had a solid grip. I gritted my teeth and strained. Slowly, my thighs straightened. By the stars, the corpses in the wagon were heavy.

Ofelia rolled the wheel near. "Just a little higher!" she shouted.

I actually lifted higher.

She shoved the wheel back onto the axle. I let go of the wagon,

and it settled with a ponderous creak. Ofelia produced a hammer, wedges of wood and banged away.

I stood to the side and examined my hands. I'd just stumbled onto a terrifying discovery. It had occurred while I'd let go of the wagon. I should have breathed hard after such a strenuous effort. I should have gasped. Sweat should have poured off me. I did not sweat. I did not breathe hard. In fact, I didn't breathe at all. I waited, and my chest remained level. I searched for my heartbeat, but there wasn't one. Before, I'd been too busy or preoccupied to notice my lack of breath.

Was I truly dead?

No! I stood. I talked. I thought and acted. The corpses in the wagon did none of those things. They lay inert. They were dead. What was I then?

Ofelia must have sensed my mood, or perhaps my feat of strength had terrified her. She quietly climbed onto the buckboard. I followed her example. She flicked the reins, and the mules resumed their steady clop. We were off to the castle of the Moon Lady.

— 8-

I lurched on the swaying buckboard and forced myself to breath. Air went into my lungs and out. Oh. Of course, how could I have spoken before unless air passed my throat? I quit breathing and felt no worse for the lack of air.

Since I'd awoken with grass sprouting through my armor, I'd neither hungered nor thirsted. A knight fought hard, ate heartily and drank much. Surely, wading through slime, battling foes and hefting heavy wagons should have built an appetite and a raging thirst. I had neither. I needed neither. I was damned. Was I dead? No. The dead, the corpses, lay in the back of the wagon. I swayed up here on the buckboard. I had fought and killed. I had also taken a crossbow bolt through the torso and dripped sluggish black drops. If I did not breathe, eat or drink, how could I do these things? What gave me strength?

I snarled silently. Erasmo would pay with his life. I would hound him to death!

What gave me the strength to move, to talk and think? If I did those things, then I was alive. Alive and damned, I told myself. I needed all my memories in order to better understand Erasmo. If those memories lay in an evil castle, then I would storm that castle and regain them.

"Do you have a whip?" I snarled.

Ofelia's head jerked up.

"Your mules are lazy. We need a whip."

"If we go any faster," she said, "the wheel might come off."

I debated running ahead and pounding on the castle gate. We approached a steep road. The castle towered on a crag of this stony hill. The castle was dark. It seemed like a strange growth, a lump of tall fungus with thistles for spires.

"It looks deserted," I said.

"The castle always looks that way from the outside," Ofelia said nervously.

Lights should have shined from it, if even from a watch fire in the courtyard. I twisted back. There was light here and there in the countryside. It must have come from hamlets or cottages or even from night travelers. One patch of shimmering light came from a pond that reflected the stars. Fortunately, the eerie howls had ceased some time ago.

"It seems too deserted for Tuscany," I said.

"The castle?" Ofelia asked.

"No. The countryside."

"Oh. The Great Mortality did that."

"Tell me about it."

Ofelia shrugged moodily. "People say it began in Perugia."

"What?" I grabbed her arm.

She shrank back. "Please, signor, I mean no harm. It's the truth."

I released Ofelia. "Tell me more."

She watched me cautiously and slid farther away on the buckboard. "It's a terrible disease," she said in a small voice. "Horrible lumps grow under the armpits and groin, and often the skin turns black as charcoal. The plague has slain peasants and princes alike. Entire villages have perished. No town or city is immune. They say millions have died from it."

Millions? That was too incredible to believe. At the recent battle of Crecy, English bowmen had slaughtered nearly thirteen thousand French knights and men-at-arms. It was a battle and slaughter beyond compare. Yet thirteen thousand was as nothing when measured against a million. And Ofelia had said *millions*.

"It's impossible you haven't heard about the Great Mortality," she said.

If millions had died, she was right. How long had I lain in the swamp? The question was beginning to terrify me.

The mules breathed heavily as they clopped up the steep road. Our speed lessened and the wagon-creaks became ponderous.

I wondered why Ofelia lied. Millions dying from plague would be a hellish nightmare. And yet, a nightmare had vomited mannish hounds and riders with pubescent snouts. That Ofelia carted these dead to a dark castle smacked of nightmare. To what sinister usage did a priestess of the Moon put these corpses?

I studied the nearing castle. Bare rocks jutted around it. The other hills, at least the ones we'd traveled, had been lush with grass, weeds, vines, brush and trees. What should make this hill so different? The answer was obviously the castle. I envisioned servants pouring oil on the hillside and smoke-chugging fire scouring all greenery. Over time, rains would wash away the dirt until only grim rock remained. The boulder-strewn hill seemed dead. The approaching castle seemed empty-or haunted.

"It's different in the moonlight," Ofelia said. "It glows with an unearthly light then. Unfortunately, then it's dangerous to set foot on the hill. My mules won't. No one dares go near the castle at such times."

She shook the reins to encourage her panting beasts.

The castle's structure seemed…alien to Tuscany. A mad artist might have rendered such a thing in a painting to imply a nightmare struggling for reality. I would not have wanted to see it glow with the

moon's light. It troubled me that this castle possibly held my memories. That implied I belonged to the same nightmare that had spawned it.

"Who built the castle?" I asked.

Ofelia glanced at me sidelong and shrugged in an evasive manner.

"What have you heard?" I asked, trying to keep the alarm out of my voice.

Ofelia muttered to herself and clucked her tongue for the mules to pull harder.

The road steepened and the evil castle loomed above. I felt watching eyes. Yet I could spy no one on the battlements, and the structure lacked windows. The walls were like lava, not hewn stone held by mortar. That seemed unnatural, as if the earth had vomited it up.

"Who built it?" I demanded. "Or is 'built' the wrong word?"

Ofelia looked at me with alarm.

"Who raised it?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" she asked in a high tone.

I wrenched the reins out her hands and made ready to halt the mules.

"No!" she cried. "Keep moving. If we stop here, we'll never make it up the steep road."

"Who raised the castle?" I asked.

Ofelia licked her lips. "You wouldn't believe me."

"I'll decide that. Talk."

"Give me the reins," she pleaded. "You're making the mules nervous."

I tossed her the reins.

Ofelia urged the mules on. The mules pulled and their heads bobbed up and down. Ofelia glanced at me.

I scowled, impatient.

She began to talk, slowly at first: "It happened after the first outbreak of plague. It was a Demon Moon, they say. …A lady appeared on the hill that night. This hill. She wore silks like a Saracen, sheer so men could see her thighs and her milky breasts. She was beautiful. A knight who had practiced a forbidden spell took his squire and page and rode up the hill for a midnight rendezvous. Only the page survived the meeting, and he babbled a mad story. The knight shouted his delight upon seeing the lady. She spread her arms and called to him. He rushed to her. They kissed, and he fell in a swoon. Next, she beckoned the lusty squire and he too fell after their embrace. When she crooked a bejeweled finger at the page, he fled. He was not yet of age and thus resisted her bewitching charms."

"What does that have to do with the castle?" I asked.

“That’s just it,” Ofelia said. “The hill was bare that night. But after the death of knight and squire, the first foundations arose.”

“You said they swooned, not died.”

A foolish shepherd heard strange sounds the next night and crept up the hill from bush to bush.”

“Look around you,” I said. “Where do you see a bush?”

“As the castle grew,” Ofelia said, “the vegetation sickened and died. People began to call it the castle’s blight.”

“What do you mean ‘grew’?”

“Look at the walls and you’ll know what I mean,” she said.

I’d already noted them. “You said the shepherd was foolish. How so?”

“He heard the knight sob for mercy on an ebon altar. There were beautiful things dancing around the bound knight. Each cut him and sipped his blood. The shepherd fled and babbled a tale of sorcery and living rock that entombed the damned. The shepherd lived in terror of the moon afterward. He sold his flock to buy candles. He burned them all night in his locked hut. He sold everything he had for more and more candles. Finally, he ran out of goods or coin and shivered before a knight’s fire in a castle’s common room. They say he begged them to keep the fire stoked all night. But who ever heard of that. In the morning, the shepherd was gone, although the cloak he’d slept on remained in the corner where he’d curled up with the hounds.”

“What do people say happened?” I asked.

“It’s what the shepherd said about the candles.” Ofelia grinned, maybe noting my unease. “He burned them because in the dark he saw the lady’s smiling face. Her features were of unearthly beauty. He said she summoned him to appear before her in the castle.”

“That castle?” I asked.

“It grows,” Ofelia said, “and the blight widens with each addition.”

“And yet you bring them more corpses,” I said.

Ofelia nodded slowly. “The priestess pays in honest silver. For the first time in my life, I’m rich.”

I eyed the nearing structure. The sense of being watched intensified, and I felt hunger. I felt as if the castle was a living thing like a wolf or lion starved for meat. Did Ofelia feed it with her corpses?

I glanced back at the dead, looked from face to face. Each was male.

“What about me?” I asked.

Ofelia tightened her dirty-fingered hold of the reins.

I turned from her and withdrew my coin. It glowed more fiercely than before and the silver was warm. I inspected the Moon Lady’s

profile. She was achingly beautiful and I felt her siren call.

"Will you sacrifice me?" I asked aloud.

"What?" Ofelia asked.

No, a voice spoke within my mind. *You're already mine. Come, my Darkling, come to me*.

With growing unease, I looked up at the battlements. This was an edifice of sorcery. It was alien to Tuscany and brought blight upon the land. Yet my lost memories lay in there, I was certain of that now.

I laughed harshly at Ofelia. "You little wretch, you're taking me to my death. A knight, squire and page, they were men. All the corpses you've taken have been men. You're safe because you're a woman. You have no intention of paying me three thousand florins."

Ofelia shook her head, although she kept hunched with the reins wrapped around her fists. She refused to look at me.

"You're still enraged at Ox's death," I said. "And what did you say before? You always have a plan. Well, madam, you're in for a surprise. Three thousand florins are what you owe. Before we part, you'll pay me in full."

"Of course," she whispered. "It's what I promised."

The road leveled out and led to a tall black gate. Ofelia drew rein before it and I jumped down. The wood seemed like petrified rock and hardly thumped as I knocked. Yet the door opened, although there was no one I could see who had moved it. I climbed back onto the wagon. To my gratification, Ofelia looked at me with wondering eyes.

Once past the gate, the mules clopped upon stone and the wagon's creaks seemed oddly muted. A moonlike glow bathed our way; the glow came from the lava-like walls. Ofelia kept glancing at me, and her face was one of confusion.

"That is far enough."

The mules snorted in surprise. Ofelia made a squeal of sound and yanked the reins, although that was unnecessary. The mules had already stopped.

A woman in a shimmering robe stood before us. Shadows hid her face and she kept her hands hidden in the folds of her sleeves. Her sandaled feet, her toes, stuck out from under the hem of her long robe. The toes seemed like molten silver.

"Priestess," Ofelia whispered. "I–I have-"

"Yes," the priestess said. "I see what you've brought. Lay them on the boards."

Ofelia turned to me, although I noticed she couldn't meet my eyes.

"Ox unloaded them before," I said. I jumped down and began depositing the dead onto wooden boards. We were in a courtyard and there were shadowed arches all around. When the last corpse bumped

its head on the wood, the priestess approached Ofelia. A silver-colored hand passed up two heavy sacks. The small gravedigger grunted with effort and thumped each sack at her feet on the buckboard. Each clinked with coins.

The priestess backed away and I approached Ofelia.

“Three thousand florins,” I said.

With a savage smile, Ofelia glanced at the priestess. “He’s his own man,” she said. “I do not claim him.”

The priestess nodded.

“Consider the unloading as gratis,” I told Ofelia.

Ofelia waited. She seemed expectant, but slowly her smile lost its breadth. Soon, she frowned.

I laughed. Ox had likely been immune from enchantment because he had been Ofelia’s servant. That’s why Ofelia had just said that I was on my own. Clearly, she expected my demise, and that would free her from having to pay her debt. She was a clever if bloodthirsty little gravedigger.

Ofelia’s mouth hardened. She yanked open a sack and began counting coins. When she opened the second sack, she shook with rage. She shot the priestess an accusatory look.

“Why should I come back if there are no profits?” Ofelia spat.

“How you spend your money is your own affair,” the priestess said.

“He’s a man!” Ofelia shouted.

“He’s the Darkling,” the priestess said in her calm manner. “He is beloved of the Moon Lady.”

The words made me shiver. I did not like them.

“You’re one of them?” Ofelia whispered in horror.

“Keep counting,” I said.

Ofelia paled, and she counted faster. When she’d finished, she tied her single depleted sack and turned her wagon around. She hunched in fear, shook the reins and took her creaking, squealing vehicle away. She never glanced back or waved goodbye.

— 9-

"Why did you stay away so long?" the priestess asked.

I'd followed her into a nearby chamber. Silver water spewed from a fountain and tinkled like chimes into a wide basin. Shadowed archways tempted me with mystery; we'd moved in a maze to arrive at this chamber. I was determined to learn as much as possible before I decided on my next move.

The priestess regarded me from within her hood. It was full of shadows, and I began to wonder if she lacked features.

"We've waited a long time for your arrival," she said.

"We?" I asked.

She laughed softly. "The Moon Lady and her maenads."

I nodded.

"You're filthy from your journey," she said. "You must bathe and don proper clothing. Then we can complete the ceremony."

"Which one is that?"

"Your pledge of soul."

"Ah," I said.

"Do I detect hesitation?"

"Madam," I said. "If you detect hostility, it's because of the rush of events. I've just arrived after a painful journey. It has taken much longer than I anticipated. Certainly, I desire a bath and garments worthy of my station. Then I must gather myself and learn what has transpired in my absence."

"You serve at the Moon Lady's bidding," she said.

I inclined my head even as I plotted. If I had pledged service to evil before, I would foreswear myself in an instant. Had I somehow brought this state upon myself?

"Surely you understand the concept of pledging," the priestess said. "As prince, you must have often taken fealty. Is that the correct term?"

"It is," I said, wondering that she needed to ask.

"Do you have the coin?"

"It's secure."

The priestess inclined her head. Then she laughed in her superior manner. "You're playing a role. No. You no longer need pretend here. You're the Darkling, the Moon Lady's chosen instrument. These are dangerous times. One misstep…well, I needn't tell you about that. Old Father Night's minions abound and they've waxed powerful on death. They are fat with spells and they've become bloated with arrogance."

"Magi Filippo learned about the folly of arrogance," I said.

"Who?"

“A minion of the Lord of Night, the one patrolling around your castle.”

“That one,” the priestess said, with a flick of her fingers. “He was a gadfly.”

“Ofelia feared-”

“Yes!” the priestess said. “Why did you ride in with her? I fail to grasp the need.”

I smiled because I had no idea how to respond.

“Have a care,” the priestess warned. “You may be the Darkling, but the Moon Lady will punish you if you snub her maidens.”

“Madam, there is no snub intended. I thought it obvious why I rode in with the gravedigger.” Nobody liked to be thought a fool. They even less liked to look like one. I suspected priestesses of the Moon were no exception, nor was I wrong.

“Hm,” she said. “I see. I suppose you thought it clever.”

I allowed myself a broader smile.

“Yes,” she said, “and you wished to strike back at Erasmo della Rovere.”

My features stiffened and I took a menacing step closer.

The priestess chuckled. “Did you think I didn’t know?”

Guile, guile, I needed to use guile. I nodded brusquely.

“He suspects, of course,” the priestess said. “Why otherwise leave a minion on patrol?”

“Magi Filippo?” I asked.

“It’s a false name. We both know that.”

“Yes,” I said. “He called himself Filippo and wore a medallion of the Cloaked Man.”

“Did he?” she said. “Erasmo must be more worried than I’d realized. What did you do with the medallion?”

“I left it.”

“On the body?” she asked sharply.

I shrugged.

The priestess began to pace. She shook her cowl. “Rash. Did you slay his bondlings?”

“Most.”

“Oh, rash, very rash,” she said. “You mustn’t let your enmity blind you to reality. The Lords of Night are drunk with death. They expand exponentially because of it. We hope they overreach and quarrel among themselves. But it was rash to tweak Erasmo’s nose, as it were. We can only hope he is too involved in other matters to take notice of this.”

I nodded blandly. I wanted to know what these Lords of Night were and what they had done to gain their exalted station.

I cleared my throat. “I’m unclear on several matters. A few of my

memories seemed to have faded. For instance-"

"After the ceremony all will become clear. It's time you bathed and donned fresh clothes. Your foul mail stinks like a sty. Afterward, we shall approach the inner sanctum where you will pledge your soul. Come! Time is no longer your ally."

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I bathed in a silver tub in a room resplendent with paintings. In some, a maid with a bow hunted stumbling men. The full moon hung in those. One showed the maid in a frilly tunic astride a stag. Panthers trailed like pets. In the nearest, a naked maid strode toward a smiling man in black. He held a dark knife in one hand and a goblet in the other. That painting troubled me most. The maid wore the beguiling smile of the Moon Lady, the same as my coin and dream. The man, he wore my features, but without the beard.

I'd shaved before entering the tub. Now I wished I hadn't.

I toweled myself and found dark garments, dark boots and a midnight-colored cloak laid out. Whoever had deposited them had also taken my rusty mail, soiled padding and sword. I put on these and ran my fingers through sodden hair.

Pledging my soul-I'd never do it. I'd palmed the coin earlier without the priestess noticing and now regarded it. It glowed, and the Moon Lady's smile was as enigmatic as ever. I studied her. There was something faint in the air…it seemed like laughter.

I flipped the coin in anger. Perugia. The engraved moon shone above the mountain city. I turned the coin back to the Moon Lady. I concentrated. The faint connection strengthened. I sensed a mild scrutiny, curious, amused.

"Why am I here?" I demanded.

You are the Darkling. You are mine.

I clenched the coin in my fist, and cut off the ethereal thoughts.

I was unarmed, and I disliked it. I began to pace. My new cloak flapped at every turn. An image came to mind, a leopard, a caged beast. Moors had captured it in North Africa, in the hinterlands, and sought to sell it in Rome. The leopard had paced as I did now. It had been caught, a thing for the amusement of others.

I scowled. No one caged me, at least not without a fight. I strode from the room and hurried through a corridor. It merged into others. I chose one at random, another and found that this corridor had side rooms. They were empty…unless I stared into them. Then ghostly shapes took form. Men and women danced in one. In another room, tormenters wheeled a rack and broke a ghost's bones. The worst showed a priestess with a silver knife as she hacked a sacrifice's chest and withdrew his ghostly heart.

This place was evil.

I soon found stairs leading down. I took the steps four at a time, raced through another corridor. I spied a large hall with moonlit chandeliers. Filthy corpses rose from boards laid on the floor. They were all too solid, all too real. Clods of dirt fell from some. Others had half-gnawed faces. They shambled across the giant hall, to an archway that roared with flames.

I ran from it, desperate now to escape the castle.

Someone shouted “Darkling,” behind me. I looked back, spied a silver robe and darted through an archway. I took corners, found a passage with an arch and ran through it. I was back in the courtyard where I’d unloaded corpses. Were those the same corpses that now shambled across a hall? Here in this place of sorcery, the dead walked again.

I chose a different archway and found myself in a bright corridor. I fled through it. Near the end, an odd feeling warned me. I slowed, and peered into a large room.

A mural of the Moon Lady filled a wall. Tripods with braziers wafted scented odors. The mural, it showed the same portrait as my coin. On the wall, however, the portrait of the Moon Lady slowly turned as if to face me. There was something ominous in that.

I noticed a dais before the mural and a pad or cushion, one often used in the custom of fealty. One knelt to a stronger in fealty, put his hands in the stronger person’s hands and pledged service. The stronger one pledged to protect the weaker, the server. The cushion on the dais was the type used for an older man’s knees, to soften the act of kneeling. I had the feeling I was supposed to kneel on the pad and pledge away my soul. The fact they desired this pledge made me believe I still had my soul. That proved I was alive in some fashion.

I entered the room. In the portrait of the Moon Lady, in the mural, was a slit window behind her. She was in a castle, I supposed. It was night in the mural. Several stars showed in the window, and then a large blue moon. I did not understand a blue moon’s significance. I suppose only an artistic genius like Giotto would have understood.

Beyond the kneeling pad was an ornate stand. Upon it lay a black belt and a sheathed dagger.

They had taken my good if rusty sword. I strode within and stopped, surprised. Torches burned in alcoves. In them were statues of the Moon Lady. No, those were idols. Many were salacious.

I strode onto the dais and kicked the kneeling pad, sent it shooting across the room. I grabbed the belt and buckled it to my waist. I drew the blade. It was black and oily, an assassin’s knife, but it would have to do.

I heard footsteps from the corridor. I leaped from the dais and ran

to an alcove. There was an archway in the rear.

"Come back, my Darkling."

I whipped around. The voice was sensuous and seductive. The portrait of the Moon Lady still turned. Her lips moved in slow motion. With her voice came a terrifying sense of presence, as if lightning had life and bolted the earth like a goddess taking steps.

I fled.

"Darkling…"

I clamped my hands over my ears. The voice was too beautiful. I took corridors, leaped down flights of stairs. Yes, I wanted my memories, but I wanted to keep my soul more.

I ran down a steep wooden ramp that kept curving. I wondered if it was for wine merchants or for peasants trundling vegetables up to the kitchen. Then I realized that no peasant or merchant would come here. The ramp led into the earth, into a dimly glowing cavern. I paused. No one thudded down the ramp after me, at least not yet. The cavern's ceiling was higher than I could reach. The rocky sides glittered with mica. I scowled and peered into the hateful depths. Then I gripped my resolve and hurried into them. It was then I noticed that my boots were noiseless as a cat's paws. Although they were made of leather, they never creaked as regular knight's boots did.

I passed smaller cave openings, but the thought of negotiating them made my skin crawl. My tunnel cooled, and I noticed wet patches on the ceiling. I was deep underground and slowed because of it. The passage ahead curved sharply.

Then something ahead roared. I would have sworn its echo made the mica glitter. The hidden beast snorted and licked its chops. I thought of an elephant-sized lion and took a step back. Massive chains clinked, and leathery sliding sounds made my imagination cringe. I backed up. I hoped the chains meant it was leashed. It snuffed wetly. Had it heard me, smelled me? I wanted to turn and run, but forced myself to move quietly in my cat-silent boots. The chains clinked again, but it was a softer sound. I think the beast lay down.

I soon reached a small side tunnel. I tested its air, and with a slow step, began to explore. The grade rose. With luck, I might reach an exit in the hill. But as the grade continued to rise and curve, I feared it returned to the castle. Before long, the cave walls merged into brick. My muscles loosened with relief. I was out of the Earth, although I'd surely reentered the castle.

Soon I spied flickering shadows and light. I moved softly like an assassin, peered around a curve and saw a massive fireplace. There was a table where a woman rolled dice. To my shock, the dice rose into the air. They rattled as if shook in an invisible fist. This was a place of horrors indeed. The dice dropped onto the table, one with

green felt.

The woman laughed and snatched up the dice, and coins appeared. They slid across the table to her side. Did a ghost push them from an invisible pile? By the stars, I hated this place.

The woman was small. She wore bright garments of yellow, blue and red. She wore a jester's hat with bells and she wore curly toed shoes in the modern style. Tapestries and Persian rugs hung on the walls. The tapestries showed ancients dressed like Greeks. They sported at play or played lyres. At least these weren't *moon* tapestries, and the woman wore colors other than silver or pale white. I inched nearer. It was time to get proper directions one way or another.

She stiffened, and it appeared as if she listened to an invisible ghost across the table. She turned, and her eyebrows rose as she saw me. She had an oval face and tanned, maybe wind-burned skin. In the paintings before, Moon maidens had been unearthly pale.

"I beg your pardon, madam," I said. "I appear to be lost."

"Lost in your queen's castle?" She shook her head, tinkled the cap's bells. "I doubt that very much, Darkling."

I hesitated to threaten her. She had a melodious voice, and there was something in her brown eyes, something mischievous and guileful. It was different then Ofelia's rat-like cunning. I sensed… weight, gravity.

"You have me at a disadvantage, madam. You appear to know me, yet I don't know you."

"With Darklings one needs every advantage possible," she said.

"…Who is your friend?"

She raised her brows and seemed on the verge of speaking. Then she glanced across the table and listened. She nodded and smiled at me. "My friend, as you say, infers an interesting thought. You're down in the dungeons, and this is a joyful night. Have you already angered your queen, or is your presence down here a judicial one?"

"A joyful night?" I asked.

"Because of your elevation, naturally. Your queen is anxious, as I'm sure you've learned. Old Father Night-" She laughed. "Your queen has spoken about whittling down the odds. What kept you so long?"

I was sick of not knowing what people talked about. "How long have you been here?" I asked.

"I can't see how that matters to you."

"Likewise," I said.

"A touchy Darkling. How amusing. Don't you think that's amusing?" she asked her invisible friend.

I concealed my annoyance, and said, "I couldn't help but notice a creature down the way. Do you happen to know what it is?"

She leaned across the table and listened to her invisible friend.

Did he speak in ghostly whispers? She studied me. The humor had left her and the weight in her eyes seemed more pronounced.

"You appear edgy," she said.

"Quite the opposite," I said.

"No. No. You're too…. What happened?"

"After the ceremony I took a stroll. My swift elevation, all these accolades, I needed time to think. I hate to admit it, but now I'm lost."

"You wear the apparel. Yes, you have the deathblade, the boots." She tilted her head to listen and soon nodded in seeming agreement. "You lack the cold-bloodedness of former Darklings. Your eyes are-"

An invisible chair scraped back. As if to match it, the woman stood in alarm. "No!" she cried, turning toward her invisible friend. "Stay. I need your-"

A door slammed, one I couldn't see.

She muttered a curse, eyed me. "He's sure to cover his bets. His position here is precarious at best. He has to maintain good relations with the maenads."

"Madam," I said, "you've misread the situation."

"Hm," she said. "-Call me Lorelei."

"Where did he go?"

"Clearly, something went wrong with your pledging. That's why you're asking about the beast. You want to leave, and in a hurry." She spoke in a rush and her thoughts seemed to tumble one after another.

I rested my hand on the knife and strode nearer. I didn't like the accuracy of her thoughts.

She sat down and weighed the dice in her palm. She eyed me coolly. "I must keep my hands clean. The priestess is fastidious concerning protocol. Yet I can answer a few questions. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Among other things," I said.

"Oh?"

This Lorelei didn't fit. Her costume, her manner, even this dice playing…it implied…I wasn't sure what. "Madam, the truth is that I lack certain memories."

"Indeed," Lorelei said, and there was curiosity in her eyes.

"Before I proceed with other matters, I want to remember my past. I felt coming here would stir those memories."

"Here?" she asked. "In the dungeons?"

"No. The castle."

She rubbed her pointed chin. She had elfin features. "The priestess has been charged by the Moon Lady to…." Lorelei grinned. "You've made me curious. You want lost memories?"

"I've found that firm decisions are the best. Before I pledge to the Moon Lady, I want to remember what I've forgotten."

“Oh, cleverly put. Yes. I like that. I also find it interesting that you’re sly enough to confide in me. But then Darklings are said to have the luck of the Damned. Hm. I’m sure she meant you to look at the pool eventually.” Lorelei tapped the table with her fingertips. “Will you trust me?”

“…To a point,” I said. *Not at all*, I thought.

She laughed. She had white teeth. “I understand. Come.” She headed toward a hidden door.

After a moment’s hesitation, I followed.

— 10-

"Madam," I whispered, "I do not wish to appear churlish. Yet even less do I wish to be brought like a fool into the priestess' presence."

We crept through a secret passageway dusty with misuse and thick with webs. Lorelei carried a candle, its flicker our only light.

"What troubles you?" she whispered.

"Doubt," I said.

"Concerning?"

"Why you should help me."

"That's reasonable enough. So let me put you at ease. First, you appear to be unique." Lorelei held up a hand to forestall any questions. "I've seen…certain situations before so that current events trouble me." She glanced up at my face. "Old Father Night troubles me. I'd rather the Moon Lady-" She smiled oddly. "The priestess understands my antipathy toward *him* and thus attempts to persuade me to the Moon Lady's course. But perhaps there is a third way. I've always been partial to third ways, the reason I am who I am."

"And that is?" I asked.

"Shhh," she whispered.

I heard muffled voices from the other side of our secret passage. Soon I heard thumps and clanks. Lorelei led me down a different passage even narrower than the first. There she flipped a latch and pressed her right eye to a spyhole. We had used many narrow stairs and secret corridors to reach here. She replaced the latch and put a dusty finger to her lips.

I'd moved soundlessly the entire time. More than once, I'd almost suggested she remove her jester's hat with its bells.

After a muffled thump from the other side, Lorelei's mouth twisted with distaste and she brushed aside long, dusty webs.

"These secret corridors are old," I whispered.

"The reason the priestess doesn't know about them," Lorelei said, swiping at webs as we crept along.

"That's contrary to reason. The castle is new."

"New to Tuscany," she agreed. "But from the old days."

"What days are those?"

Lorelei grinned. "When the gods were young."

"Madam, I have no idea what that's supposed to mean."

"This is an old game," she said, "and some of the players have gone mad. You've undoubtedly heard the term 'let sleeping dogs lie.' Well, dog spelled backward is god. Do you see what I mean?"

"When were the gods young?" I asked.

“It’s a matter of perspective. Now you must keep quiet. We’re near the pool. I suspect guards, traps or hidden alarms. We must be alert.”

That amounted to standing motionless for a time. When the gods were young, what had she meant by that?

Lorelei pinched the wick. “Can’t let them smell the smoke,” she whispered. She pressed her hands against the wall. Something clicked. She pushed open a hidden door, wiped her feet and stepped through.

My gut clenched as I followed her into a corridor that glowed with eldritch light. I expected a waiting throng with capture nets, and knew sick relief that it was just her and me. Lorelei pushed the door shut and it was impossible to tell it was there.

“That’s excellent craftsmanship,” I whispered.

“Coming from a Darkling, that’s praise indeed.”

“Do Darklings normally sulk through secret passageways?”

She smiled knowingly. “Darklings are the prince of Shadows.”

“You mean they’re assassins?”

“A crude word,” she whispered. “Come.”

We crept through the corridor, entered another. From far down the other way, maybe two levels, I heard marching soldiers.

“The priestess has called out her guard,” Lorelei whispered. “That might be good for us. If my invisible friend has spoken, I think they’ll hunt in the warrens first. We must hurry.”

We soon reached the threshold of a strange place. I glanced through and spied a steeply sloping floor. Torches crackled along the sides. Lorelei studied the threshold and finally moved her hands an inch from the frame, seeming careful never to touch wood. She stepped back and took a deep breath.

“I can’t tell for sure,” she whispered. “The priestess could have employed a hidden guardian. But calling forth such a one is difficult. I suspect she would first let the guards search for you. Are you willing?”

“I want my memories,” I said.

“Watch your step. Keep your hands out of the water. It’s…well, don’t let even a drop touch you.”

She tried to send me in first in case an invisible guardian waited, or so she wanted me to believe. I listened. It felt more like a cave than a room. I hated caves, and I hated traps even more. I grasped her elbow. She tried a cunning twist to free herself, but I clamped harder.

“We’ll both go,” I whispered. And I marched in with her.

She cringed. I looked right and left. The pool was a sunken pit of oily water, a small patch at the bottom of the room. Droplets formed on the ceiling and a drip plunked into the pool. The torches hissed, until slowly they flickered as before.

“That was a foul thing to do,” she whispered.

"Will you forgive me?"

Her mouth lost its tightness. She even managed a wry smile. "There's a needed spell. Without it, the water merely remains poisonous."

"When were you going to tell me this?" I asked.

"There's a price for its casting," she said.

"I have three thousand florins in the courtyard."

"You offer me silver-colored dirt?" she asked, offended.

"Florins are coins," I said.

"And coins are fashioned out of veins in the Earth. My price is greater. You must answer three questions."

"Done," I said.

She gave me a pitying smile, as if I could have whittled her down to one or two questions. "You must answer truthfully."

"Of course," I said.

She gave me a level stare. "Why did you take so long coming to the castle?"

I suspected she wanted to hear something other than my wagon ride with Ofelia. Why was the answer important? I shrugged. I wanted my memories and here was the pool. So I told her how I'd awoken with grass sprouting through my chainmail.

She muttered to herself before asking, "Was…was the circle tampered with?"

"What circle?" I asked.

She stared at me and soon became thoughtful. "I'll save the last question." She drew a pocketknife and shuffled down the steep incline. She spoke softly, cut her palm and squeezed out several drops. The water rippled, became darker. She took a shuddering breath, folded her knife and took out a handkerchief. She wrapped it around her palm and used her teeth to help tie a knot. Then she trudged up to the level area beside me. "Go ahead," she whispered, sounding winded. "It's safe. You didn't have to drag me in with you. I'd have given you away before now if such had been my intent."

I crouched and slid my feet down the incline until the tips of my boots almost touched the water. A drop plunked from the ceiling. The oily water stirred. I stared greedily into the waters.

…Images slowly formed under the rippling surface. I saw myself ride out of mountainous Perugia. I rode with armored men-at-arms in the dark along the *Via Lavicana*. Our lanterns rattled and Tuscan cypresses lined the road. The trees sheltered us from a cold wind. We galloped for the coast. Erasmo rode beside me. His father had been loyal to House Baglioni since before my birth. The underwater images blurred. They turned into-

I saw myself wade through a swamp with a sword held in one

hand and a torch in the other. Erasmo waded behind me, his cheeks slick with sweat. The soldiers had remained behind, frightened by Avernus' wicked legends. Erasmo and I searched for deathbane. We sought it because-

In the Pool of Memories, in the images underwater, I climbed out of the swamp and strode among hangman trees. Erasmo struggled out of the muck and hurried after me. His jeweled fingers gripped a heavy bag. Ahead of him, I found a huge tree stump. It had iron bolts riveted into the ancient wood, with rusty chains attached to the bolts. On the ends of the chains were manacles. I remembered thinking that the legends were true. Sorcerers committed hideous sacrifices in the grove of hangman trees. Here was an ancient altar of wood.

Standing above the Pool of Memories, I clutched my head and moaned. Dizziness gripped me. I lost my sense of perspective. It seemed as if the "I" of myself whirled around in a mental twister. I lifted out of my body. I plunged down into those images in the water, down into lost memories.

— 11-

I had the sense of falling, and then grew aware of new surroundings. I was young again, a nine-year-old lad. I ran upslope among towering pines. I slipped and slid over a carpet of brown pine needles.

"Come and look, Gian. You have to see this. It's lost treasure."

I ran after Erasmo della Rovere. He was young again like me, nine. My father the prince of Perugia had taken us with him as he inspected country estates. Erasmo sprinted up a steep slope. He was a reed of a boy and wore a costly tunic with black leather boots.

"Wait for me!" I shouted.

Erasmo slithered through a giant bush and disappeared. I barreled through a moment later, and twigs and branches clawed me.

"Look out, Gian," Erasmo said with a laugh. He darted aside.

I stumbled out of the bush, past him and smacked my forehead against a granite cliff.

Erasmo laughed shrilly and slapped my back.

"That was a dirty trick," I muttered, tasting bits of granite between my teeth.

Erasmo only grinned wider. He had sandy colored hair and bright blue eyes. He had a narrow face and was clever like a fox. His parents were nobles. His father was my father's closest friend. Between us, Erasmo was taller, but I was stronger.

I shoved him, and thought about clouting him a good one.

"Look at that, Gian." Erasmo pointed at a small cave.

I shrugged moodily. I had scratches on my arms and face.

"There's treasure in there," Erasmo whispered.

I looked at him with wonder, all my bruises forgotten.

Erasmo darted into the cave, and a moment later, I followed. It was dark and narrow.

"Come on!" Erasmo shouted, and his voice echoed.

I felt my way forward and marveled at his courage.

I found him with a candle, with flint and tinder. Soon he had the candle lit, and in the flickers, our faces glowed with perspiration. "Look there," he whispered.

There was a hole in a dirt wall. Erasmo's thin arm shoved the candle nearer. I crouched, peered in. At the back was the corner of a small chest sticking out of the dirt.

"It's buried treasure," Erasmo whispered.

My young heart pounded with excitement.

"I'll hold the candle." Erasmo shoved a dagger at me. "You crawl in and pry it out."

I took the dagger, hesitated only a moment and then squeezed into the narrow confines. I jabbed dirt. I sweated, and I heard earth shift around me. I would have backed out, but Erasmo might have called me a coward. So I dug, and all of a sudden, the hole collapsed. It surprised me, and I found myself unable to move or breathe. I screamed. I sucked down dirt. Then I felt hands on my feet and Erasmo tugged. I slithered hard and he must have dug like a dog. Soon I was out, my face wet with tears and stained by dirt.

"Were you crying?" Erasmo asked amazed, the candle by my face.

I glared. We both wanted to be knights. Knights were brave. They certainly didn't cry.

"Are you hurt?" Erasmo asked.

I brushed past him and rushed out of the cave, desperately trying not to hiccup as children sometimes do after they'd been weeping. If he ever told anyone about this….

***

The situation changed. I was powerless to halt the leap in time. The dizziness returned, motion, and then there was a sudden halt and I found myself in a new place, several years older. Erasmo and I mock battled with axes. We were twelve. He was thin as a reed. I had thicker shoulders. I laughed as I saw him clearly.

Erasmo wore a quilted jacket made by his mother. She worried that he might bruise himself training with weapons. She doted on him, fed him pastries and pies and bought him canaries, cats and dogs. She couldn't understand why the animals kept disappearing. Erasmo did secret experiments with them: cruel, boyish pranks that often went too far.

Today we mock fought, practiced in a sandy training area. A smith banged an anvil in a nearby shed, likely straightened a knight's sword. Whitewashed walls surrounded the area. Older squires sat on benches, idly watching us.

We swung, but never to hit, just to pretend. We yelled mock insults. We clouted the axes together, liking the sound. They were old axes, but still too sharp for young lads to be using like this. We were too young to know better.

"Soon I'll be a squire," Erasmo panted.

"Me too," I said.

We clashed the axes together. Erasmo grinned. So did I.

"I'll certainly never cry in a cave," Erasmo said.

I frowned. He darted around me, and he used the flat of his axe to thump me in the back. He laughed as I stumbled.

"Remember?" he shouted. "Don't let insults get the better of you."

I whirled. He faked a chop at my head. I flinched.

"Oh-ho!" Erasmo laughed. And several of the squires laughed

from the benches.

I swung hard. He darted aside and swung his axe down against mine. The blow shocked and numbed my hands. The axe dropped free and thudded onto the sand.

“I win!” Erasmo shouted.

My face blazed with shame. I snatched up the dropped axe. “Let’s try that again,” I said between clenched teeth. I swung, but Erasmo was ready. He did exactly the same thing, clouted my axe hard with his and knocked it down. This time I hung on tightly with both hands. I stumbled forward, and my sharp blade chopped into Erasmo’s extended left foot. Bones crunched. He screamed, and toppled like a felled tree.

I let go of my axe-handle, horrified. Erasmo, my best friend-what had I done?

***

My father whipped me for that with a belt. Erasmo della Rovere was crippled for life. He would never run again and would certainly never become a knight. I begged Erasmo’s forgiveness. He gave it sullenly at his father’s prodding. His mother glared at me every time I entered her presence.

The years passed. I become a squire, a knight and finally the prince of Perugia after my father’s death.

Much to Erasmo’s chagrin, he entered the Church, the priesthood. For a noble there were two courses, knighthood or the Church. Before long, because of his father’s station and wealth, Erasmo left for Avignon, Provence. Provence was technically a part of old Gaul, but presently belonged to the King of Naples. The popes had fled Rome many years ago and had held court or the papacy in Avignon.

Something happened to Erasmo in Avignon. He left the priesthood, went to the University of Paris and soon become a noted lawyer. He’d learned clerking in the Church, but he’d read dubious texts and arcane lore stored in Avignon’s catacombs. Men said the pope himself had taken him to task, and the two had spoken privately for hours. After Paris, Erasmo returned to Avignon, where he remained until his mother died. He returned to Perugia for the funeral.

I’d become prince, and for old time’s sake, I begged him to stay here with his friends. The truth was I could use a keen lawyer. I’d become engaged in the violent struggles between the quarreling city-states of the Romagna, which was part of the Papal States. With the papacy in faraway Avignon, it gave all of us a freer hand, which we freely took.

To my surprise, he agreed. Then an incident occurred, a small thing. The vortex of these memories remorselessly took me to it.

***

I burst into the upper study, my spurs jangling. I wore a sword, mail and a scowl. Laura, my wife, had wept in my arms. She'd told me how Erasmo had secretly leered at her, how he'd obscenely wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. She'd begged me to dismiss him. When I'd told her to use her haughty airs on him-it was then she'd given me her secret fear. There was something evil in Erasmo, she said. I must rid myself of him today.

I strode across thick carpets, Persian rugs. Erasmo had followed the newest trend of unhooking the expensive rugs from the walls and using them on the floor. It was a quaint custom. Laura was a true noble, normally sure of herself. Something had keenly upset her regarding Erasmo and I intended finding out what.

Erasmo sat at an ornate table with an open book. There were hundreds of books around us, a treasure of inked words between thick leather covers or on ancient vellum scrolls. A robin tweeted at the ledge of an open window. Lanterns flickered from several corners.

I halted before the table.

Erasmo looked up. He wore thick furs and a velvet hat. A silver chain with a ruby pendant hung from his neck. He had aged poorly for so young a man, becoming heavier than his boyhood frame had suggested. There were circles under his eyes. He had keen eyes, very dark and piercing. That was strange. I thought his eyes used to be blue.

Erasmo wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. He had a rather disgusting way of doing it. "Milord," he said.

"Erasmo," I began.

He held up a thin hand, one heavily encrusted with expensive rings. It caused me to tighten my mouth.

"Do you recall the affair with Velluti?" Erasmo asked.

I nodded brusquely. Velluti was a village that I'd laid claim to. Clerks in Rome had disputed my claim and now marshaled troops and arguments against it.

Erasmo tapped the book. "Did you know that the Baglioni line goes back-" he gave me a thin-lipped smile, almost eerie "-it goes back beyond the time of Ancient Rome?"

I knew there were some preposterous tales. They were old stories told us as children when we'd been bad.

"Oh, this is very interesting, milord. This is an arcane book filled with ancient lore. Your line-" Erasmo shrugged. "My point, milord, is that Velluti is your old ancestral home. I'm in the process of writing a devastating argument. I can guarantee your victory against Rome and then Velluti will belong to you."

"Oh?" I said.

“I’ll need to make a brief visit to Avignon, however. When I return…things will go much differently, I assure you.”

I frowned, noting something odd in the way he said that.

“What I’ve learned these past few days,” Erasmo said, “it’s a marvel.”

“Can you explain?”

“Will you let me wait until I’m utterly certain, milord?”

“…Yes, of course,” I said. I owed him.

“Excellent!” Erasmo said. He snapped the book shut and tucked it away in his fur robes.

— 12-

Erasmo stayed away in Avignon for two years, although he sent a letter by courier to Rome. I won the village of Velluti through it. After the two years, he returned to Perugia gaunt, with lines in his face, although his limp was hardly noticeable. He bowed and acted courtly whenever Laura entered the room.

I commented on that.

Laura laughed with scorn as she brushed her long blond hair in our chamber. She sat on a stool before her mirror. She was imperiously beautiful, my wife.

"Erasmo's eyes burn with lust whenever he looks at me," she said. "He's a viper. You should drag him to the gallows and-"

"Madam," I said. "Please. He is Erasmo della Rovere, my childhood friend. He is a Doctor of Philosophy and a noted lawyer."

Laura shook her head. "He hates you. Don't you understand that?"

"After all these years," I said, "his foot seems better."

"It was an accident," she said. "You can't keep blaming yourself for it."

"Yes, yes," I said.

Laura lowered her brush and turned to me. "Gian, listen to me."

"I wanted to tell you that Erasmo and I are leaving tomorrow night."

"Why?" she asked.

"There is a sickness in the city. It could prove deadly. Erasmo showed me in his book that deathbane would cure it. Nothing else seems to."

"Where is this 'deathbane'?" she asked.

"In a swamp-"

"Don't go, Gian. Don't trust him."

"I'm taking a patrol of knights along, madam. There's nothing to worry about. Do you think I fear Erasmo?"

"There's a worm in him, husband. It gnaws at his heart. He plans treachery."

"I shall watch him," I said.

She stared at me. "At least keep him away from the children."

I nodded and decided it was futile to speak any more about this with her. It was perhaps the worst mistake of my life.

***

Erasmo and I waded through that swamp. That had happened a few weeks ago, a few months maybe…before I fell into the enchanted sleep, in any case. I found the wooden altar, the stump of an ancient

hangman tree. I inspected the rusty chains. As I did, I heard a rustle of cloth. I turned. With two hands, Erasmo clutched a knotty cudgel. He had a terrible grin on his sweaty face and his black eyes blazed. He swung the cudgel hard against my forehead.

I woke up groggy, chained upon the stump of a hangman tree. Grotesque creatures like apes cavorted in the wavering torchlight. They whirled and hooted. I thought it a mad dream. But my head throbbed, and then Erasmo in a black robe stepped into view.

"Gian Baglioni!" he cried.

A foul taste filled my mouth, and unbidden came the olden tale of our line. There had been one before the time of the Romans and even before the time of the Greeks. He'd lain with a moon maiden. The child of their union had been human like its father, but with cunning like the semi-divine mother. Since that time, went the tale, we had become the Baglioni and had become beloved by the Moon Lady. I'd always thought it a mere story. The old gods of the Greeks, they were myths, nothing more.

Erasmo spoke differently that night in the swamp, in the grove of hangman trees. He spoke about Old Father Night. He boasted of opened doors, of spells let into our world that had revived the Old Ones. He said the Moon Lady had once spurned Old Father Night. Now the dark god's favor would turn to him-to Erasmo della Rovere-by sacrificing me.

"Do you know how long I've waited for this night?" Erasmo boasted. "Oh, this is sweet justice, Gian. Sweetness multiplied a thousand times. Do you know what I plan?"

Chained on the altar, I glared at him. Laura had been right. I'd been a fool. How could I have been so blind?

"The world is about to change, Gian. You crippled me. Oh, you've no idea how long I've searched to find a means to heal my foot. You cheated me with that axe blow. Now I'm going to take everything that's yours. And do you know how I'm going to do it?"

I kept glaring.

"I'm going to return as you. I'm going to give myself the very image of arrogant Prince Baglioni and then bed your Laura as mine. She won't spurn me then. And I'm going to kill your children, Gian. Then I'll sire new babes on Laura, that proud wench."

"You're mad!" I shouted.

"Look at these creatures. They were men once. I changed them with magic that you can hardly conceive of. The power I'm about to gain…the world is going to change. I shall be its greatest sorcerer, together with other farseeing men."

"Other raving lunatics in Avignon!" I shouted.

"We are men of deep learning," Erasmo said, "and men of great

daring. You are a morsel to please Old Father Night. Then-"

One of the furry creatures hooted forlornly. I glanced at it, and terror ran up my spine. I recognized it or him. He'd been one of my men-at-arms, one who had openly disliked Erasmo.

"Men shall grovel before me," Erasmo boasted.

I yanked on the swamp-rusted chains. I jerked and thrashed until one snapped and then a second old chain parted.

"Now we'll see who laughs last!" I roared, and I began to break the last two chains.

The manlike creatures fled hooting in terror. Erasmo backed away, picked up a spear and hurled it at me. It sank into my belly. I began to withdraw the spear, my eyes riveted onto Erasmo. He paled and fled with his creatures….

***

A horrible sense of dizziness came upon me. It lifted upward until the sense of "I" moved back into the lump of clay, the lump that was my body. I felt like retching.

"Darkling! Darkling!"

I found myself standing before the Pool of Memories. Images faded in the dark waters. I was in the castle. Lorelei shook my elbow.

"We must leave," she whispered.

"I must know what happened next," I said. "I must look more."

"I hear shouts," she said. "We must flee into the passageway."

I ripped my arm free of her grip. I stared into the dark waters. I remembered…I remembered….

"We must flee," Lorelei hissed. "The priestess has sent guards. Come now or-"

I snapped out of my daze. Horror gripped me. I scrambled up the incline. Lorelei scrambled after me.

"Go," I whispered.

We went, hurrying out the same way we had come.

— 13-

"Where is it?" Lorelei ran her small hands along the wall. She glanced down the spacious corridor. Armor clattered from that direction. Booted feet echoed.

"He's here," a woman shouted. It sounded like the priestess, but it was hard to be sure. I'd only heard her when she'd been calm. "Hurry!" she cried. "Capture him."

The clank of armor intensified. Soldiers shouted. They climbed stairs.

Lorelei snarled a curse and pulled a necklace from a pouch. The ruby on the end began to glow. She aimed the ruby at the wall and somehow focused its hellish light. Faint lines appeared-the outline of a door. Lorelei pressed a point on the wall. Something clicked. The door swung toward us.

"In, in," Lorelei hissed, and she jumped through.

I followed.

She shouldered me aside and drew the door shut with a snick. Her oval face was pale and perspiration dotted her upper lip. She panted from our run.

I did not pant. I did not breathe. I'd died in the swamp. I had… my brow creased with thought.

"Go," Lorelei said. She held up the chain and used the glowing ruby like a lantern.

"Hurry!" the priestess shouted from the other side of the wall. Soldiers clanked past, no doubt racing for the Pool of Memories. A flimsy wall was all that protected Lorelei and I from capture.

Trembling, Lorelei headed in the opposite direction. I followed in a daze, less concerned about capture than about what I'd just learned.

A woman in a silver tunic-likely the priestess who now chased us-had whispered in my ear as I'd lain dying. She'd chanted:

'*Darkling, dear*.

'*Moon-servant*,

'*Die now*.

'*Change*,

'*And come to Castle Loathing*.'

I turned on Lorelei and caught her watching me. We stood in an intersection of passageways. One direction lacked dusty webs, our way earlier. I saw our footprints in the dust. The other directions seemed hoary with age.

"None of this makes sense," I whispered.

Lorelei lifted an eyebrow. Even in my distress, I recognized that she fought for calm. From the direction we'd fled came thumps. It

sounded as if soldiers banged halberds against the wall.

Despite that danger, I waved my hand vaguely. “This newly risen castle with its ancient corridors, a gravedigger paid outrageous sums for corpses, elongated men who race like hounds, and me. I make the least sense. I took a spear in the gut, later a crossbow bolt through the chest. The dead don’t walk and talk. I died, or I think I did.”

“If you wish to tell me what you remember,” Lorelei said, “you may. But I’ll not ask you about it.”

“Saving your last question?” I asked bitterly.

Instead of answering, she slipped the necklace over her head and adjusted the ruby just so.

The weight of my revelations was too much to bear alone. I told her what I’d learned.

“Ah,” she said. “Interesting.”

“Why is it interesting?”

She tapped her cheek, seemed about to speak, hesitated and then spoke smoothly. “I think the priestess cocooned your last spark of life in the coin. A spell of the Moon Lady gave the spark strength.”

I didn’t think that was what Lorelei thought interesting. Still, the idea of my life cocooned in the coin interested me.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Why, that the spark remained in the coin while you….”

“Died?” I asked.

“Metaphysics has always bored me,” she said with a shrug.

I took out my coin. Was its glow my last spark of life? If that was true, I dared not lose it. I slapped my chest. If the coin contained my life…then I was alive.

I laughed grimly. “What exactly is a Darkling?” I asked.

“You are.”

I shook my head. “I’m the prince of Perugia. For years, I’ve fended off my neighbors and kept the papal tax collectors at bay. Plagues that devour millions and men with snouts…those are impossibilities.”

“The world you knew is gone,” Lorelei said.

Erasmo had hinted at that. As prince, when I’d breathed, no one went about in wagons collecting the dead as Ofelia had. There had been no riders with snouts. There had been mercenaries and bandits, though. But men transformed into dog-like creatures-

“This must be a nightmare,” I said. “I’m dreaming all this.”

“You’re hearing me but you don’t understand. Doors have opened. Because of this, the Old Ones have awakened with greater power than before. There….” Lorelei shook her head, jingled her bells. “You’re a Darkling that has momentarily escaped the Moon Lady’s grasp. I find that unique and therefore interesting. Here’s my third question. What

are you going to do?"

Moon Ladies, mystic doors-whatever that meant-magic castles that grew, they were too strange. Erasmo della Rovere had tried to sacrifice me to Old Father Night. Erasmo had threatened to rape Laura and slaughter my children.

"I'm going to hunt Erasmo della Rovere," I said.

"Slay a Lord of Night?" Lorelei asked.

"Is that what he calls himself?"

"It's what the world calls him and the others."

I stared at Lorelei. "How can Erasmo have gained these powers? How can castles grow? It's madness."

Lorelei seemed indecisive for all of three seconds. "The Old Ones is a good term. In ancient times, men still faintly remembered the bad days that had gone on before. They gave the Old Ones names like Zeus and Artemis. The real Old Ones were worse then the Greek stories of the gods, but time had faded humanity's collective memory. Before ancient history began, the Old Ones fell asleep. They-Listen, Darkling. Sorcerers and witches have thought through the ages to tap the essence of the Old Ones. But there are darker secrets in this world. There are doors-"

"Erasmo spoke about doors," I said.

"I think Erasmo and his friends opened one of those doors. They brought something through." She clutched my forearm. "The Lords of Night are drunk on death. That's the secret to their power. That's how they rouse those who should have been left asleep. The chaos, the raw power, released from the Great Mortality-"

"What does that mean?"

"It's what people are calling the mass dying from plague."

I asked, "The black growths on armpits and groins?"

"It's a nasty disease," Lorelei agreed. "The hideous ways of death and the sheer volume has torn rationality from our world. It has empowered the Lords of Night, made them stronger than kings, more important than-"

Lorelei cringed as axes thudded into a wall. It was a distant sound, but it likely meant the priestess had discovered our secret corridor.

"The arrogant Lords of Night are like all sorcerers and witches," she said in a rush. "They think to use the Old Ones, to tap their mystical energies like a plowman harnesses oxen to furrow a field. Then they think to pen the oxen, keep them domesticated until they need them again. But the scale of death is simply too great. Their actions have roused the Old Ones. This castle is proof of it."

"We'd better get out of here," I said.

Her fingers dug into my forearm. "The Lords of Night are drunk

on their undreamed of power. It's godlike, certainly. But maybe you can help stop it. That knife you picked up is a deathblade. Some of the loosened things are immune to ordinary steel. But they're not immune to your knife."

"Let's go," I said. "They're almost in."

"The Moon is your ally and daylight will be dangerous to you. Remember, you're the Darkling, the prince of Shadows. You must-"

"I must return to Perugia and stop Erasmo," I said.

Lorelei looked at me with pity. "You're no longer the ruler there. You-" She glanced down the passageway. "They're in. We have to run. Come."

***

We hurried through the warrens under the castle. That meant we strode through tunnels with mica glittering in Lorelei's lamplight. It was cold down here and damp. I felt the weight of the Earth over me. It made me hunch my shoulders. This tunnel might collapse as the hole in the cave had when I was nine. Would I linger on now, buried under tons of stone? Would I survive because I needed no air, no food nor water? My footsteps dragged. I wasn't sure I wanted to go any deeper.

Maybe Lorelei noticed. She stopped and thrust an unlit torch at me. After a moment, I took it.

"I'll brazen it out with the priestess," Lorelei said. "But I have to get back to my room now."

I scowled at my unlit torch. Had we bypassed the beast?

"Darkling," she said.

I angrily waved the stick of tarred wood. "I can't go down there."

"The way is safe," she said.

"It might collapse."

"This tunnel has remained for over two thousand years," she said.

"You can't know that."

"But that's just it," Lorelei said. "I can."

I scowled.

She stepped back in alarm.

My shoulders drooped. "Sorry," I muttered. "I won't strike you. It's just-"

"Darkling, do you remember I spoke about a third way?"

I nodded.

"I'm the third way. There are several of us. We're…we call ourselves the Immortals. We're not, I suppose. We can all too readily die. But we've lived an awfully long time. I'll try to help you if I can, but part of the way we've managed to survive the millennia is by knowing which side to keep on good terms with."

"Why tell me this?" I asked.

“You’re unique, and the hour is dreadful. Now go. The tunnel will hold, I promise.”

I glanced into the depths. It was damp and cold, and so dark. I quailed at the thought of marching down there.

“Why does the Moon Lady need a Darkling?” I muttered.

“Surely that must be obvious,” she said.

Something boomed above. It might have been a boulder rolled out of the way.

“The Lords of Night will be hunting for you,” Lorelei said. “Because of Magi Filippo’s pendant, they may even know who you are. Trust no one. Be especially careful near Perugia.”

I stared into the depths, hated the idea of going deeper.

Lorelei made a last jingle with her bells. “Let me see your torch.”

I slowly held it up. She touched her lamplight to it. The tarry end whooshed into smelly flame.

“Goodbye,” she said, “and good luck.”

I muttered something. She retreated and soon stepped around a curve. My shoulders hunched. I glanced at the torch. The flame would last so long and no longer. I slid my foot forward, shuffled the other. I needed speed. According to Lorelei, the way was long. I had to gain a march on the priestess and slip past any guards the Lords of Night might have placed on patrol around the castle.

The tunnel narrowed ahead, and it kept going down. My grip tightened and I blinked repeatedly. The time in the hole in the cave, buried under dirt…there had been another incident. I shuddered as I recalled it. The memory brought me to a halt.

It had been in my father’s day. He’d hired out Perugian men-at-arms as mercenaries to a count of Rome. The count had besieged Todi. The men of Todi were hardy soldiers and from upon the walls had jeered the Roman. In his fury, the count had ordered mining operations. He’d put me in charge and ordered us to dig out the rebels.

The count had been a fool. Todi’s soil was rocky. My soldiers had wielded picks and sent a laborious shaft into the earth. I recalled the sweating, the hard work, the foul air that had drifted with tiny particles of rock and dust. It had caught in our lungs. We’d all spat dirt for days. I had gone down with the men because I’d been the commander. The count had sent us wormy wood, which we’d used to shore up the tunnel. The point of the memory was two-fold. The men of Todi had heard our laborious picking. They’d picked a counter-shaft. And in burning torchlight, they’d come upon us.

The screams, the desperate swings, the tight confines, the shove and push, it had been horrible. I’d taken a gash in the arm and lunged at a black-faced miner. I’d shoved a dagger through his ribs. We won

that fight. But the next day, the wormy, rotten wood had collapsed ahead of me. The Earth had shaken like a quake, and dust and rocky particles had vomited into my face with a blast of air. I'd joined my men, and we'd dug like dogs to free those trapped ahead, bloodying our fingers.

The collapse had cost me eleven Perugians. And it had stoked my boyhood fear of caves into terror. I'd raged at the count for giving me wormy wood. But what I'd really done was goad him into a towering fury so he'd ordered me home. My father had railed and later, the count of Rome became my worst enemy. Yet none of that had mattered, because I'd escaped the horrid tunnels at Todi. Nothing could have gotten me to go down them again.

My torch crackled. I stood deep in this tunnel under the evil castle of the Moon. My feet had become rooted. Lorelei had left some time ago. For all I knew, the priestess' guards hurried down here. Maybe the priestess would release the beast.

I glanced over my shoulder in dread. I hated this place.

Erasmo had tricked me into wading into the swamp. Later, he'd told me he would take my guise and my wife. Was his sorcery that powerful? According to Lorelei, the world had changed by what he'd done. I bared my teeth. And I thought of Erasmo lying atop Laura.

"You foul cur," I whispered. I slid my foot forward. This was worse than waking up with grass through my chainmail. This was worse than being-

"I'm alive!" I hissed. "Now move, Gian."

What would I do if my torch went out while I was deep under the Earth? I groaned, and I increased my step. It was the best I could manage as I strode deeper into darkness.

— 14-

I cringed as a drip hissed into my sputtering torch. I jerked the torch from side to side, fanned the flame into greater life, but was careful not to strike the walls. The tunnel was narrow. Sometimes I'd twisted through passages. Too often, I had to crouch and once I'd crawled. I'd also splashed through more than one puddle. Water clung to the cramped ceiling like evil beads. They were wily, these drops, and only dripped when I glanced elsewhere.

Black spots now danced before my eyes. It wasn't a lack of air, for I didn't breathe. I could feel the weight of millions of tons of rock and dirt ready to crush me into oblivion as a man crushes a flea between his fingers. It terrified me. Every time I squeezed through a particularly tight spot, I dreaded wedging myself.

The torch sputtered again. I closed my eyes and retraced in my thoughts the various choices I'd made. Had I correctly followed Lorelei's instructions? She hadn't said anything about these tight passages. Might I have taken a wrong turn?

Maybe because I had my eyes closed, I felt a soft voice calling. It was soothing. I cocked my head. I heard nothing audible…I *felt* the voice, and I found that I clutched my belt where I kept the coin hidden. I palmed the coin, fingered the engravings. The sense of soothing grew. I had the feeling that if I begged the Moon Lady, if I knelt and pledged my soul that all would be forgiven. She would show me the way out of these tunnels. I could walk under the stars again. I could-

Something roared in the tunnels behind me. My eyes snapped open. I twisted round and stared into the dread blackness. It had sounded like the guardian beast, the chained thing. Was it loose? Had it sniffed out my trail?

I sensed the softest of chuckles. I stared at the traitorous coin, at the mocking curve of the Moon Lady's lips. The coin had led the beast to me. The coin, or the Moon Lady, had betrayed me.

I wanted to hurl the coin into the darkness, but didn't dare. It held my spark of life.

"I'll never be yours!" I shouted.

An answering roar dislodged a shower of droplets. One hissed as it dripped into my torch. Another slid under my collar. Then scratches and leathery sliding sounds told me the beast wriggled through a narrow part of the underground tunnels. I believe I knew where it was by my memory of that particular tight spot, and it was much too near to me.

I saw a momentary picture in my mind of what would happen

when the beast arrived. The thought showed a giant, lizard-like creature dragging me back to the castle like a wolf-bitch carrying a pup.

I squeezed the traitorous coin. Then I thrust it into my belt. It was impossible that I could fight such a monster in these narrow tunnels. I heard a clink, maybe that of a giant collar striking rock.

“Curse you,” I whispered. The black splotches before my eyes increased. I fled crouched over. My poor eyes missed a curve and I slammed against stone. I wanted to weep. Then I slammed against stone again. The jar knocked the torch out of my hand. It slid into a puddle. The flame hissed. I snatched it up, shook the torch and watched as the flame shrank. I would rave like a lunatic if it went pitch black.

The monster roared once more. It was closer than before. The tap of its claws and the brush of its leathery hide-

I scrambled faster and with grim fatalism took yet another crash against a rock wall. This couldn’t last. Then I realized the tunnel had widened. I could stand upright, and did, and I ran. I took corners faster and struck outcroppings of rock less often. Then I noticed the faint scent of…of lilies! I laughed like a madman. I must be near the surface. Hope revived me, and it shot anger through me like hot oil. I cursed the priestess of the Moon and her beast. I would never enter a deep tunnel like this again. It would be better to die fighting above ground than allow oneself into this wretched kingdom of rats and worms.

The strain of my thighs told me the grade angled steeply upward. Unfortunately, the wheeze of the beast behind made my back crawl. I could hear its belly slide over rock. Then the ceiling vanished. And in the dim illumination of my flickering torch, I only spied rock walls. I had raced into a cul-de-sac, a dead end.

I must have taken a wrong turn. The urge to grab the coin and make a deal-

I looked up at a glimmer of faint light. I hurled aside the worthless torch. The walls around me had cracks and stony juts. It would take an acrobat to scale them or a desperate soul. I put my boot onto an outcropping and hoisted myself upward. I had no time for niceties, no time for caution. The approaching monster roared. I hoisted myself higher. The boots must have had magical qualities. The slightest protrusion was enough to push me upward. My fingers and wrists seemed stronger than I recalled. I was almost like a fly in my ability to cling and climb. The opening above was a jagged crack, the kind earthquakes make. It seemed too small for me.

A loud, leathery scrape announced the monster as it popped out of the underground tunnel. It was huge, a giant lizard greater than the

crocodiles that Moors boasted lived in the Nile River. Its flickering tongue darted at the torch on the stone floor, and it hissed in rage as it burned itself.

Maybe I should have flattened myself on the wall. I was about halfway up. Maybe my cloak had properties that would have allowed assassin-like stealth. But I feared losing my grip if I didn't keep climbing. It would be a wretched end, swallowed alive into the beast's gullet. I kept climbing, and my belt-buckle scraped against stone.

The monster's head jerked up. It was a lizard-quick move. It lunged awkwardly as its tongue darted at me. Like a frog's tongue, it was much too long. The tongue lashed against my boot with a wet splat and held as if glued. It numbed my ankle as if a strong man had hit it. The tongue yanked at my boot as the beast dropped down. I clung to cracks in the wall with manic strength, but felt my fingers slipping. I shook my foot, tried to dislodge the sticky tongue. The tongue stretched to an obscene degree. Then, just before it tore me off, the tongue peeled away and slithered back into its gapping maw.

I scrambled like a beetle, and would have fallen but for the magical boots. The beast croaked a deafening cry, and it lunged upward once more, claws scrabbling rock. Its long tail seemed to propel it higher. The forked tongue shot out and wriggled inches from my boot heel. Then the giant creature slumped back onto the floor.

My fingers latched onto an edge of dirt. My biceps bunched. My head broke through to the surface. I heaved, squeezed through the narrow opening and rolled onto damp grass. Then I scrambled upright and laughed. The monster roared below, and my laugh turned into a snarl. I pried a rock out of the ground and heaved it at the beast. A leathery thud told me I'd hit. I hurled more stones, certain it would find a means to climb out otherwise. Finally, it retreated into the stygian gloom of the tunnels.

As I stood there peering into the depths, strength flooded into me. Weariness vanished, as did the black spots before my eyes. I seemed to swell with power. Baffled, I turned. The full moon blazed. It fed me strength like a maiden trickling me grapes. I'd yet to see the moon since waking with grass through my armor. When I'd been with Ofelia, there hadn't been a moon. Staring at the bright orb made me wonder about time. How much of it had passed since Ofelia had driven me through the castle's black gate?

By the phase of the moon, it seemed as if many nights had passed. Perhaps the castle had been like an evil fairy tale. In those, time often moved strangely. The nightmare of the tunnels…it seemed like I'd been down there a lifetime.

I lifted my arms and soaked in the moon rays. This was my food, water and air. It felt wonderful, glorious. The coin wanted my

attention. The presence felt stronger now that I stood in the moonlight.

"No," I said.

I felt a brief moment of anger-that I'd be sorry for this decision. Then there was nothing at all.

Shortly, I recalled Lorelei's parting words. I must beware the minions of the Lord of Night. They would be hunting for me. The priestess of the Moon yet hunted for me, I knew. I glanced about, but couldn't spy the vile castle or even the hills that had surrounded it.

I did notice a faint stench. The crack lay at the bottom of a narrow valley. There were pools of scummy water edged with lilies and nearby hills. Those were more jagged than the pervious hills and lacked vineyards. A fire shined like a beacon on one of the hills. With my hand, I shaded my eyes from the moon. A dark town lay higher up on that mountain. A dirt road wriggled its way past the town. The stench came from that direction.

Was that a watch fire? Did a sorcerer and his underlings wait for my arrival? I needed directions to Perugia. Maybe Erasmo waited there with his minions. He was the Lord of Night. Erasmo. My hands clenched of their own accord. I headed for the hill fire, all the while keeping a wary eye out for the lizard-beast.

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The stench made horrible sense. I looked down at an old limestone pit. Rotting corpses lay in heaps, one atop the other. There were men, women and children, hundreds of them. I recalled Ofelia's words about the plague. The corpses had whole heads, meaning no axe or sword had smashed their skulls. Many had lumps under their armpits and ugly sores. It hadn't been a massacre, but pestilence.

I squinted at the hillside fire.

The limestone pit was at the bottom of the hill. The fire was a quarter way up. Instead of vineyards or orchards, this hill looked like pastureland for sheep. I sensed motion there, but couldn't see the actual flames. It seemed as if shapes moved around the fire. A breeze brought what seemed like songs. When the wind stilled, the sounds became silent.

Would creatures of the night sing songs? I could not picture Erasmo sitting among them tapping his fingers. But I was curious nonetheless. I followed the dirt road up the mountain.

***

I crept toward the bonfire, and I swear my coin wriggled. I clutched my belt there. The feeling was more than a premonition. *Stay away. You're not yet ready for this*.

I smiled grimly and slipped behind a mossy boulder.

The bonfire blazed with a tepee of pine trunks. Flames leapt

twenty feet high and trails of sparks spiraled toward the stars. Why would the Moon Lady fear that I saw this?

A cluster of parked wagons stood at the edge of the bonfire's light. Mules and horses cropped grass or munched oats from feedbags. Hobbles kept them stationary. Equine curiosity kept the animals focused on the people around the fire. There were young and old, rich and poor. They held hands and danced around the giant fire. They chanted:

Ring around the rosy,
Pockets full of posy,
Hush, hush, hush, hush,
We all fall down.

At 'down,' they collapsed as if struck dead. They lay there as the fire crackled. Soon they arose, clasped hands and once more began the dance and chant. Dogs wandered among the people. A few of the curs barked along as if part of the ceremony.

As I watched, a pang of loneliness touched me. These were ordinary folk, even if their activity was baffling. Since awakening, I'd only seen sulking mercenaries, a gravedigger, a sorcerer's minion and altered men as hounds. I'd seen shambling corpses, an invisible gambler and a priestess of the Moon. Lorelei had claimed to be immortal. Here were normal people. They wore holiday finery, although a feeling of fear pervaded among them. Many glanced at a group of men and women who stood apart in the shadows.

Maybe those were Erasmo's people. Those others wore cloth of gold garments and stood among velvet banners. They had silk jackets and fur capes. Yet their heavy faces, their facial scars and brutish mien spoke of peasants. A priest stood with them. He had his hands tied behind his back, and by his purpled face had taken a beating.

That seemed wrong. Yes, there was a feeling of wrongness here. Despite the holiday finery, the people were tense and kept glancing at the other group.

A bearded fat man detached himself from the shadowed group and approached the dancers. He sauntered like a knight, dressed like a prince in tight hose and yet had the features of a town butcher. He raised meaty hands as one who held authority. When the dancers noticed that, they left the fire and flocked around him. They had sweaty faces and many breathed heavily. I debated climbing my boulder as they circled him. They blocked my view.

My coin seemed to grow heavier then. But the Moon Lady's warning only increased my desire to stay.

The butcher spoke. At least, I presumed he did. He had a

strangely high voice, although the villagers listened raptly.

He said, “The clergy tell us they know why we die. They say we’re wicked. They say if we pray in the churches, if we give them extra florins they’ll beg the saints to help us. We’ve prayed. We’ve paid, and yet people die like sheep among raving wolves. The saints are deaf. The priests are liars and death stalks us unmercifully. We’ve all lost kin. We’ve all fled doomed villages, or many of us have. I’ve seen death everywhere. I’ve seen it in Milan. It rages in France.”

The butcher worked himself into a passion. I’d seen his type before in taverns: the drunkards who bellowed before they rose up to fight. Dogs had to growl and bark first. His words entranced the people and more than one glanced at the bound priest. Did they mean to hang the poor fellow?

Maybe my curiosity dulled my caution. Maybe I’d grown weary of the Moon Lady’s nagging. Maybe it was because they were ordinary folk. His speech and their dance were extraordinary. I wanted to know more, even told myself I needed knowledge of this so-called changed world if I were to outwit Erasmo.

I left the boulder and strode to the back of the crowd. I sidled next to a man who stood apart from others. He wore elaborate leather boots that reached his mid-thighs. He had a long face and a wide-brimmed hat with a crow’s feather. The hat and boots declared him a noble. The crow’s feather seemed strange. It should have been an ostrich feather.

I nodded as he glanced at me. “Who is he?” I whispered.

The noble stared at me too long. Maybe this had been a mistake. Could people sense my difference?

“Are you new here?” He whispered hoarsely and without moving his lips.

“…I fled my village,” I said.

He nodded as if understanding, although his lips twitched, perhaps in mockery.

I realized my garments and cloak were well tailored. I’d foolishly picked a peasant persona. “I noticed the fire,” I said. “I’m hungry.”

“They’ll be food afterward. First the flagellants must help expedite our sins.”

“The speaker is a…flagellant?” I asked.

“You’ve never heard of them?” The noble seemed more amused by the moment.

I shook my head.

He adjusted the brim of his hat, leaned closer. “The priests are powerless against the plague. Or so the flagellant says. If it is sins that have caused this-”

“The Great Mortality?” I asked.

“The Black Death,” he whispered. “That’s what we call it. Prayers are no good, so the flagellants practice harsher methods.”

The noble’s lips had remained motionless throughout his whisperings. It was more than odd. I felt as if he concealed something. His manner was too superior, too amused with me, as if he knew a joke I didn’t. It was then I noticed his scent, much like a wet hound.

“You don’t mean they beat the priest?” I asked.

He gave a strange chuckle. “The priest is given the choice of blessing the affair. If he’s stubborn and refuses, he earns his beating.” The noble glanced at me sidelong. “Do you think that’s wrong?”

The butcher shouted and interrupted our talk. I heard cloth tearing.

Women moaned. Some men shouted. A few children laughed wildly. The crowd surged back and jostled the two of us. It allowed me to spy the fat man, the butcher. He’d ripped off his expensive shirt. He had white skin with countless thin scabs.

One from his group handed him a whip. It was like a cat-o-nine tails, but with little iron spikes that rattled at the ends.

“Spare us!” the fat man shouted toward the heavens. He slashed himself with the whip, cut his skin. “Forgive us our sins!” He slashed a second time, a third and a fourth.

A woman shrieked as blood began to flow.

A second man from the group of flagellants ripped off his silk shirt. He joined the fat man, whipped himself until blood mingled with his sweat.

“Stop this madness!” the priest howled. “This is evil. You must stop!”

“We abase ourselves before thee!” the fat man shouted skyward. “We spill our blood to cleanse the Earth of stinking plague!”

Several of the women of the flagellants scratched their faces until they bled. The villagers swayed. They mumbled in horror. They shrank back. Some bowed their heads and prayed fervently.

“This is against the holy-” the priest shouted.

“Shut up!” a flagellant bellowed. He clouted the bound priest on the side of the head. The priest crumpled. The flagellant kicked him viciously in the side.

“Stop that,” I said.

“Don’t bother,” the noble with the wide-brimmed hat whispered.

I glanced at him. He grinned, and I noticed then that he had fangs instead of teeth. He had long canines. He backed away from me and into the darkness.

People turned and stared, and I stood alone. The butcher stopped in mid-stroke. Worse for me, the hounds swiveled around. Most of the dogs had worked in near the two men bloodying themselves. A big

brute of a hound raised its head and began to sniff the air. Its hackles rose and it barked at me. The other hounds followed its lead. Several curs moved stiff-legged toward me.

"Shoo," I said. "Get out of here."

The closest hounds tucked their tails between their legs. One whined, backed away. Several barked more wildly.

"Look at his face," a woman screamed. "It's the color of a corpse."

The butcher, the bloody head flagellant, edged toward me. He pointed his gory whip. "Who are?" he asked in a nervous voice. "Name yourself, I command it."

All the while, the hounds barked as if I was a bear they were too afraid to attack.

"Stop kicking the priest," I said.

"He's dressed in black!" a man shouted. I recognized it as the voice of the noble I'd been talking with, the noble with fangs for teeth.

The butcher's eyes lit up. "It's a demon!" he roared. "It's a demon of Death. Our torments have brought it up from Hell. Now we must stone it. Kill it and the plague will stop."

"Nonsense," I said. "What-"

A stone hit me in the back of the head, enough so I staggered. The only one who was behind me, at least that I knew about, was the noble with fangs instead of teeth.

Men and women scrambled out of my path.

"He's doesn't bled," a man shouted, one hidden in darkness, my evil benefactor. "His head is gashed and he doesn't bleed."

"Stone the demon of Death!" the butcher roared. "He's colored like a corpse because he's walking death. Kill it and save yourselves. Do as I-"

I dashed at the butcher, leapt to avoid the thrusting dagger of a nearby man and dodged the butcher's wild whip-slash. Then I slammed an elbow into his face. The thud was loud, but he had a strong neck. It snapped back, but not as Ox's had. Blood gushed from the butcher's broken nose and he toppled backward. I whirled around. Stones flew, a half dozen. I dodged and ducked and only one struck me a grazing blow on the shoulder. I picked up the flagellant's whip and snapped it at the nearest people. They surged back with screams. A few tripped over others and sprawled backward onto the ground.

The people feared and hated me. The noble with fangs for teeth had disappeared. I hurled the whip, turned and raced into the night. I had no desire to hurt regular folk.

I expected the people to bay like hounds and give chase. The butcher, however, lifted himself on one elbow.

"No!" he shouted. "Stay! We've driven the demon of Death from us. Now we must celebrate our victory. Help me up, and then

someone bring that devil-priest to the fire. It's time he learned a lesson."

I heard no more, too busy sprinting up the lonely road. I hoped the noble with fangs for teeth followed. I'd pay him back for his troubles. All the while, I ignored the sense of smugness emanating from my coin.

— 15-

I reached the hill's summit. A plain spread out below. Roads webbed it and a city sat in the nexus of roads. Even better, I recognized the place. It was Siena.

As the prince of Perugia, I would skirt it. The city called itself a republic, which meant its merchants made the rules rather than a hereditary prince. I had rented my knights and foot soldiers and had gone along as captain on three separate occasions against Siena. The last time, I'd captured the fort that guarded the main gate. Siena's merchants had wisely ended the siege by agreeing to the demands. Because of my part, the Sienase merchants hated me. Although I should point out that several years earlier, I'd hired out to Siena. My men and I gave them hardy service, and yet the coin-counting merchants had decided to keep our back pay. Storming that fort had balanced the scales of honor.

I trudged downhill. I would skirt the plain until near Lake Trasimene. Then I would head into the mountains for Perugia.

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A little over an hour later, I heard whining. I thought of handlers gripping leashes and hounds straining to attack. I presently trudged uphill between boulders and tall grass. Down there by the bluebottle bushes, branches shook.

I sprinted along the slope for some trees. I should have been more alert. Lorelei had warned me. I soon strode steadily through the trees, and despite the steep angle and the litter of half-buried rocks, I never once twisted my ankle. Because of my keen night-vision, the world seemed odd. It lacked the bright greens and sky blues of day. Instead, the leaves were dark and the grass gray, yet I could see an owl swivel its head to watch me or a fox pause as it stepped out from hiding. It felt like a twilight half-world, a shadowy realm that only I inhabited.

I ran downhill, found a stream and splashed in it. I wondered if I should lie down. I did not breathe. I could simply be like a rock and wait for the hunters to pass. No. That was knavish, and there weren't any deep spots in the stream.

I climbed a boulder and ran along an old fallen log. There was splashing behind me. I shimmed up a tree, peered back. Hounds ran through the stream. They were altered, elongated humans. They bunched together and whispered in low growls. Then some ran one way, some the other. Of handlers and horsemen, I saw no sign.

Maybe I could ambush these creatures one at a time. I had my deathblade. One persistent hound splashed in the same direction I'd taken. He flicked his limbs into the water like a finicky but persistent

cat. He stared into the rippling current, and I wondered if I'd left footprints. Soon, he climbed up the same boulder I had, followed the path along the old log.

I eased my knife from its sheath. If I dropped silently, I had a chance for one swift stab.

"Prince Baglioni," the hound whispered in a harsh, inhuman growl. "I know you're near." His head swiveled from side-to-side. He had a strangely undershot jaw and bulging eyes. "Prince Baglioni," he whispered, "it's me."

I squinted, and horror touched me. The face…it just might have been Signor Guido, my old arms instructor. He had been a gallant gentleman, a favorite of the ladies. In those days, he had sported a thick white mustache and a neat little beard.

"Prince-"

"Up here," I whispered.

He froze, and whined as he looked up. I dropped out of the tree. He cringed and whined again, even baring his teeth. It hurt to see him degraded to such a low condition. He had always worn finery. Now he was naked like a beast, with sores on his side.

"Is that you, Signor Guido?" I asked.

His tongue lolled and he sidled closer like a hound that wished to be petted. The desire was so apparent that despite my repugnance, I patted his shaggy head. He squatted on his haunches, beaming. It made me ill.

"I'm so glad to have found you, Prince Gian," he said in his doglike growl.

"Is it really you…Guido?"

He hung his shaggy head and whined. Then he squeezed his eyes shut and shook like a hound shaking out water. "He did this to me, my prince."

"Erasmo?"

Guido cringed as he pissed squirts of urine like a terrified dog. "He-he said I slighted him long ago."

I remembered. Erasmo had hated my arms instructor. Signor Guido had swaggered wherever he went, a master of the sword and loved by the ladies. It must have eaten Erasmo with jealousy.

"What can I do for you, old friend?" I whispered.

His rump twitched like a hound wagging its tail. "No, no, my prince, it's what I can do for you. I hate…him."

"Erasmo?"

He lowered his head. "He-he changed many of us."

"Wait," I said. "I thought Erasmo had taken my guise."

Guido panted, and his deformed face twisted with agony. "Not to us. We know, we know. But never can we say. I was the last…the

last-"

"Changed?" I asked.

"Yes, yes," he said. "I'm the last to…to think of old days, old ways. Oh, I have a hard time with names. But I remember you. I taught you. I once stood as you do now."

"Ah, Signor Guido," I said. "Name the favor and I will give it to you."

He cringed horribly. "They call. They call with their whistles, my prince."

I'd heard nothing.

"We must find you," he panted. "We cannot kill, but must tree, must capture."

"Do you wish a release from this existence?" I asked.

He shrank from me. "No, no, my prince, I–I live. I will lead them away from you. Then you must sneak in and slay the master."

"Erasmo is here?" I asked.

"Please. Don't say that name. No. He is not here. But the hunter is here. He whips me and kicks me if I speak words."

"Does this hunter have a crow's feather in his cap?"

"Yes, yes, that is him. Will you kill him, please?"

"I swear it, old friend. And I shall slay…the other one for what he has done to you."

"Thank you, thank you, my prince," and Guido licked my hand. Then he trotted away, looked back once and then loped into a thicket. Moments later, he howled as a hound who has found the trail.

I hurried in the opposite direction, more determined than ever to make Erasmo pay for his evils.

***

Hours later and countless miles distant, I ran through a pine forest as I heard hooves. I stopped and listened for baying hounds. The hoof-beats neared. Scanning the dark forest revealed nothing new. These hunters forwent lanterns or torches. I thought about the noble with fangs for teeth. Were there sorcerous means for tracking as well as using altered hounds?

I hid, drew my knife and waited.

The hooves drew nearer. I grew tense and tried to count numbers by the drumming against the cold earth. Through the trees, I glimpsed motion. Surely these were minions of Erasmo della Rovere. No ordinary horsemen would dare ride so hard at night without light. The cavalcade thundered past. Soon the sound of hooves dwindled.

I sheathed my blade and stepped out of hiding. A horn blared in the distance. Several heartbeats later, a faint horn answered from even farther away. I was certain they hunted me. After a few moments deliberation, I changed my route and headed into the deeper woods.

Maybe an hour later I grew troubled. I'd missed something important. I slowed. Weasels, owls and bats had completed their night's work. Dawn approached. Soon, starlings would sing and robins scour the ground for the early worm. I should rejoice. Evil creatures hid during the day. What had I missed?

I advanced cautiously. Something was wrong and I had no idea what or why. I turned in a circle and eyed each pine in sight. With a slow step, I approached a thicket. I wanted to reach Perugia, not hide like a rabbit. I listened. Silence. I brushed my knife-hand against my lips. Despising this cowardice, I eased into the thicket and waited. A dollop of cowardice was better than rash courage that would see me killed. Above all else, Erasmo must die, and that by my hand.

Through the screen of leaves, I scanned the forest. All seemed peaceful and yet a sense of terror filled me. Something grim approached. I felt it in my bones. Was it the lizard-beast? With an effort of will, I stood and looked around.

The first crack of dawn touched my eyes. It sent a wave of weakness through me. I toppled sideways and crashed against branches. The fiery blaze of dawn was several magnitudes too bright for me. I shut my eyes like a bat caught in the light. I needed a cave. Numbly, I recalled Lorelei's words. The moon was my friend and the sun was my enemy. I might have wept at my fate. I might have raged. Instead, I drew my cloak over my head and hunkered like a hibernating bear.

My thoughts blurred and time jumped. For a single moment, I heard patter on pine needles…later, something chittered near my ear. I tried to rise, but once more fell into a stupor. If I dreamed, the imprints of them vanished upon my awareness later the next twilight.

I eased out of the thicket as stars appeared. I was an evil creature of the night. Like werewolves, vampires and altered hounds, I ran loose when good people locked their doors. How could I lead Perugia's knights now? Which tournament could I enter? The barons of Perugia would elect a new prince. Its people would find my bolthole, drag me out and kindle flames under my feet. Could I hold Laura, hug the twins, cold as a corpse, a thing that only came out at night? What was I?

With heaviness of soul, I renewed my trek to Perugia.

***

Hooves drummed. Hounds bayed eerily. I flitted like a shadow, used trees, boulders and folds of the earth. Rage boiled in me. I wanted vengeance. It was like a fever and the moon rode high in the night sky.

I backtracked into a fig orchard. It must have been several years since anyone had pruned the trees or yanked out weeds here. I waited

as hounds raced past, their human noses sniffing the original trail. Sorry creatures, twisted by sorcery, elongated men who ran naked on their hands and feet. Yet by Signor Guido's example, a few of them were still capable of nobility. Horsemen followed. They wore cloaks, jerkins and held lanterns. They seemed human enough, but a closer examination proved the lie of that. They had faces like wooden masks and eyes of charcoal. The expressionless men spurred their horses so blood dripped from flanks. None of the men shouted. None laughed, frowned or snarled. They seemed like lifeless puppets, yet they gripped lances or swords and I knew they hunted me. Among them rode the man with fangs for teeth. He had his wide-brimmed hat with its crow's feather and he grinned. A golden pendant dangled from the chain around his neck. I had no doubt the pendant bore the Cloaked Man.

"Faster!" he shouted. His hoarse voice was all too familiar.

When they galloped out of sight, I emerged from the orchard and headed for the next hill.

I soon darted into another orchard of fig trees, these wilder than those I'd left. That troubled me. These looked like healthy trees, would likely produce a good crop of figs. All a peasant needed to do was prune branches and weed between the rows, and later pick the fruit. These trees implied years of neglect. That implied the plague, Great Mortality, the Black Death, whatever one wished to call it, had swept through the surrounding villages years ago. I could not have 'slept' for years. That was too dreadful to contemplate.

Sounds ahead drew me out of my reverie. I climbed a boulder. Branches snapped about fifty feet straight down. Hounds bayed at that. Both sounds came from a narrow ravine thick with brush and brambles.

Something silvery broke out of the brambles below. It was a woman wearing a hood. She glanced wildly over her shoulder. She wore a short tunic that barely concealed her thighs and she gripped a bow. She dashed between two bushes. Moments later, human hounds broke out of the same brambles. They panted and gnashed their teeth in eagerness. None had Signor Guido's nobility, but seemed hopelessly degraded as they sniffed her trail.

I leaped from my boulder and found myself crashing through bushes, plunging down the steep grade after them. My garments resisted the thorns and branches almost as well as chainmail. Then I was through and sprinted in the ravine.

Hounds bayed, and then came a terrible scream.

I drew my knife and burst into a glade. The woman stood at the end of it. She held her bow and sent an arrow at the pack baying to reach her. One hound dragged its hind legs, with an arrow in its side.

She missed, coolly notched another arrow and sent it humming into a hound's mouth. Then the twisted, elongated humans were upon her. They sank human-like teeth into her flesh. They punched, slapped and clawed. It was a horrifying performance. She fought back with a knife and wounded one. Then a hound ripped the knife from her. I expected it to stab flesh. Maybe the creature had forgotten how. Like wolves, they ravaged with teeth.

I shouted the Perugian war cry.

A human hound whirled around. I slashed. Smoke billowed from its face. Then I became like a lion among jackals. Teeth flashed at me. Fists and fingernails hit and cut. I thrust and hacked, and I realized my deathblade was exactly that. Each wound poured smoke. Each cut brought a howl from the twisted creatures. Soon I thrust my knife into the last one's throat, heard it gurgle and hurled it off the woman.

A horn blared faintly in the distance. Could the others have heard the howls? Of course, they had heard. I knelt by the woman. She bled profusely from three bad bites. The worst poured blood like a maiden pouring water from a pitcher.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Her silvery garments told me she belonged to the Moon Lady.

"Shhh," I said.

She groped for my hand. I took hers.

"I've been looking for you," she whispered. Blood stained her teeth.

"Let me bind your wounds," I said.

"Listen," she pleaded. "I'm dying. I know it. I must complete my task."

I nodded.

"You must return to the castle," she whispered. "You must complete the ceremony and become the Darkling. Lorelei lied to you."

What could I say to that? "I suspected as much," I said. I wanted to ease the woman's passing.

"The Lord of Night is cunning," she whispered. "Erasmo has summoned Orlando Furioso, the black knight. You must beware the black knight. If you're to survive, you must gain all your Darkling powers."

"Yes," I said.

"Return to the castle," she pleaded.

She was a brave woman, had turned at bay and fought to the very last. I admired that.

"You cannot defeat Erasmo as you are," she whispered. "He holds the Tower of the East. He-" She coughed blood, too much.

"Be at ease," I said. "I will do as you ask."

She looked at me with glazed eyes. Then she died. I brushed my

palm across her eyes and closed them. I was sick of running like a frightened peasant. I wanted the hunter who had sent hounds after a young maid and who'd kicked Guido in the side. Signor Fangs for Teeth thought it a joke to fling rocks at my head.

I studied the grim tableau around me, arose and thought about Magi Filippo. It was time to set a trap of my own.

***

I waited in the boulders above the ravine. Riders came on fast. Through the trees, I heard the jangle of their equipment and saw the bob of lanterns. My coin grew heavy then.

"Hold!" a man shouted. His voice came through the foliage and the jangling sounds quit as horses whinnied.

Return to the castle. You must not risk capture, my Darkling.

"That way," Signor Fangs for Teeth said. "He's over there."

I knew then that the hunter was a sorcerer, at least enough of one to sense when the Moon Lady communed with me and in what direction.

I took out the coin and whispered, "You're giving me away." Prudence stopped me from saying more.

I tucked away the coin and saw the lanterns approaching. They were supposed to have followed the hounds' trail and to have found the slain moon maiden. While they examined the dead, I would have crept near enough to strike.

I slid from my perch and couched behind the boulder. I had the advantage of a steep and brambly slope. They could not ride their horses up it and I might possibly attack them one-by-one if they dared climb on foot.

I wondered if the Moon Lady knew the hunter could track through her coin, at least when she attempted to communicate with me. If she knew, then she was trying to scare me off. If she didn't know, it meant the dark gods had limitations.

Like wild boars and with a great shaking of leaves, the band broke into the open. Dead-faced men rode in the van and in the back. Signor Fangs for Teeth was in the middle. He held up his hand. Riders drew rein and woodenly slid out swords. None bothered looking upslope, but waited like statues. I couldn't decide if they were true dead men or under a wicked spell.

The hunter removed his wide-brimmed hat and mopped his forehead with a cloth. He fiddled with the crow's feather, put on the hat and adjusted it to a rakish angle. Then he leaned forward, with both hands on the saddle's pommel. Leather creaked as he peered up. I saw him smile and expose his signature fangs.

"It has been a good hunt." He scanned the ridgeline. "But now my master wishes to see you, Darkling. It's rather urgent."

I crept from behind my boulder and eased behind brambles. Carefully, I began to descend down-slope.

"He prefers you intact, undamaged. But if you resist too frantically, we're allowed…." His grin widened. "I shan't say 'kill you', as that's rather redundant. But I'm sure you understand the drift of my thoughts, signor. It's said that once you were a gentleman of the highest quality."

Something crackled down to my left. I peered intently. A dead-faced man crept uphill. I scanned the brambles. There were others. Oh, the hunter was clever. I hadn't seen them dismount and slip into cover.

I heard a whine behind me uphill.

"Hsst, keep quiet," a human hound growled.

"It's odd living in the dark," the hunter said. "The old ways, they die hard. Perhaps that is why I was at the bonfire with the flagellants. I remember before the change occurred-" The hunter shrugged, and he raised his voice. "Walk down like a gentleman, signor. It won't be pleasant for you if I unleash the hounds."

I drew my deathblade. I'd often practiced knife throwing as a squire and had attained a degree of skill. But to trust all on a single cast and possibly lose my deathblade, it was risky. Yet I remembered what had happened to the bondlings when I'd slain Magi Filippo. I slid farther down-slope.

"Here," a hound howled from the ridge. "Here, here, here, he's here, master."

The hunter laughed triumphantly and reached into a saddlebag.

I slid down-slope faster yet. Then dead-faced men dismounted, five of them with swords. They formed a shield wall at the foot of the slope.

I stood up, about halfway down.

The hunter pulled his hand from the saddlebag and raised a thin stick. "You're wise," he said. "Now walk down into the lantern-light."

"You made a mistake," I said.

"If you mean Guido the hound," he said, "it's you who are mistaken. Once I learned of his treachery, others spiked his paws onto wood while I flayed him alive. It was an instructive time."

I flipped my deathblade and caught it by the tip. "You not only live in the dark," I said, "but the dark has flooded your soul."

The hunter pinched the brim of his hat and tipped it. "Well spoken, signor. Now if you'd hurry, we have a long journey ahead of us."

"Your mistake is in thinking this is a hunt," I said.

"Do you prefer the word 'chase'?"

"No. War." My arm snapped forward. The knife whirled, and I

heard a wet thud. The hunter's mouth sagged. His stick fell from his grasp. Then he toppled from the saddle to crash onto the ground.

Around me, in the brambles and below, dead-faced men collapsed as if someone had cut puppet-strings. While as before, the hounds bayed as if their skin had caught fire, and they fled.

I worked down the rest of the way, put my foot on the hunter's chest and yanked out the blade. Smoke trickled from the wound, and his medallion winked as if sunlight had struck it. I crouched beside the body and peered at the golden pedant. It was of the Cloaked Man. I reached for the thin stick, thought better of that and searched for an ordinary twig. With it, I prodded the medallion.

"Erasmo della Rovere," I said, directing my speech toward it. "Can you hear me?"

I waited, but nothing happened. I prodded the medallion again, considered taking it, but rejected the idea. If the hunter had been able to trace me through my coin, surely the Lord of Night could do so with a Cloaked Man medallion.

I forced a grin. "How's your foot, Erasmo?" I glanced around to see if anyone was near. No one was. I bent low and whispered, "In the swamp, you shouldn't have run away. You should have fought me like a knight. I had a terrible wound. You might have won. But then the Good Book says, 'The wicked flee when no man pursueth'."

I rose abruptly, and I kicked the corpse. Erasmo held my wife and children. I stared at the medallion, wondering if it was true that a sorcerer could retrieve images from it. Had Erasmo heard my words? I did not know. Then I continued the journey to Perugia.

— 16-

Halfway through the next night I reached the southern end of Lake Trasimene. Stars glittered on the still waters. Fishermen had surely retired at dusk and now slept in their cottages, their boats secured until morning.

Long ago Hannibal of Carthage had invaded these lands. He'd lured a Roman consular army into a trap along the northern shore of Lake Trasimene. According to ancient accounts, Consul Flaminius had marched the legions on the road to Perugia. Wily Hannibal had conjured a mist, hidden his troops near the lake and demanded silence. Hours later, the legions had tramped unsuspecting along the lakeshore, with their gear a-jangle. At the precise moment, Hannibal swept aside the fog. With a thunderous hurrah, his army charged down on the strung-out Romans. The sorcerer of Carthage slaughtered fifteen thousand legionaries that day, along with Consul Flaminius.

Thinking grim thoughts, I trod upon bricks laid down by those ancient legionaries. It made me wonder. How long ago had I ridden out at the head of my horsemen?

I raced upon the road, a dark shadow. I passed empty villages. They'd become homes for owls and foxes. A dog barked once. I investigated, and found a villa where a night watch clattered down narrow lanes, no doubt making their rounds. I leaped up a wall like a cat and sat on a dark battlement. I waited until the watch clanked around a corner. They were ordinary men with lanterns, halberds and helmets. They gave me hope. If altered men prowled the dark, a brave night watch became even more necessary. The dog, a gray mastiff, sniffed in my direction and began to bark hoarsely. The watch shouted. Some lifted lanterns, others their halberds. One man aimed a crossbow.

I dropped outside the wall onto gravel, and continued toward Perugia.

On this section of road, weeds grew between the ancient bricks. Later, I passed what should have been the first Perugian outpost at an overhang of ivy-covered rock. I checked, but found no billet or gallows. What had happened to the outpost? I passed more signs of neglect and signs of encroaching nature. Brush grew thickly and sand had drifted onto the road. In a word, the wilds were reclaiming lands laboriously torn from them, no doubt due to the plague. Yet surely, there would be enough people left in Perugia to keep the road clear.

I neared the turnoff to Velluti. Years ago, Erasmo had claimed it was the Baglioni ancestral village from before Roman times. The town rested on a mountainous plateau, nestled between two groves.

Darkness reigned in the village, and a gate lay ajar as if the town was deserted.

In my haste to reach Perugia, I would have passed on but for the crickets. They merrily chirped as I hurried. Then the chirping quit. It was so sudden I halted, frowned and stepped back. The crickets burst into life. I walked forward again. There was an eerie absence of noise. I stepped back a second time, and the world's sounds resumed as before.

As the prince of Perugia, I'd often led her soldiers into battle. I'd just as often camped in the wilds. If a step farther would have silenced crickets those times, I would have slept peacefully every night. I took that step now, concentrating. The silence swung shut like a door. I peered back. Beside the dirt road, a cricket shifted position, its wings a-blur but silent. I snapped my fingers. The sound was subdued, distant. I kicked a stone. I could hardly hear it.

It is said that a cat will deliberately sleep on a person's chest, its nostrils near the sleeper's mouth. The cat will steal the sleeper's breath until death occurs. That is nonsense, of course, but many believe it. As I stood on the weedy road, it seemed that some invisible thing stole sounds as they were made.

I stepped away again. An ominous noise caused me to whirl. Something big and heavy clopped up the road. It jangled of chainmail and clunked of plate.

I hurried behind a boulder because the noise recalled to mind one of Lorelei's warnings. I must beware once I neared Perugia. I soon spied a beast of a horse. Its hooves were like a smith's hammer striking sparks on the paving. The horse was black. The rider wore dark plate-armor and a spiked iron helm.

In the old tales, black knights were villains. They painted their armor to blot out any heraldic symbols. That was to hide their liege or their own identity, or it meant they were landless and poor. Thus, the knight lacked a page to polish his armor. So he painted it to retard it from rusting.

The horse moved at a trot. I sensed power, strength and arrogance in the knight. He rode as if he would trample whatever stood in his way. I recalled the moon maiden's words, to beware the black knight. She had called him Orlando Furioso, which meant, Mad Orlando.

I knew *an* Orlando. We all did. He had been Charlemagne's greatest paladin. In some tales, Orlando and his best friend Uliviero had died at Roncevaux against the Saracens. In other stories, Orlando had gone mad and had departed in Charlemagne's greatest hour of need. Afterward, Orlando had met a grim fate. All were legendary tales and from a time over five hundred years ago. The knight riding toward me could not possibly be the same man. Yet if a sorcerer could

conjure any warrior to his side, Signor Orlando would be an excellent choice.

The rider stiffened as he passed my boulder, and he shifted so his armor creaked. He brought up a gauntleted hand. A chain rattled, one end attached to an oaken haft. At the other end swung a spiked ball. It was a morningstar, an ugly weapon, difficult to use well. Some horsemen preferred it, and for good reason. While on a charging horse, a sword stroke produced a numbing shock to the wielder's hand. The morningstar's ball struck just as hard, but because of the chain, the shock never reached the wielder.

He passed my boulder and turned onto the hilly road to Velluti. The clop, the clink and the leathery creaks quit on a sudden. As eerily, their image wavered as if viewed through water. In time, rider and horse plunged through Velluti's gate.

I fingered the hilt of my deathblade. This strangeness spoke of sorcery. The black knight was supposedly one of Erasmo's champions and he had entered my ancestral village. That seemed ominous. With a swirl of my cloak, I glided toward Velluti to investigate.

***

A haunted place meant ghosts or demons. Velluti was dead, without even a moan to suggest lost souls. I passed the village-well, the smithy and sheds. They seemed faded, washed of essence. I spied a rake in the middle of a lane. Elsewhere I saw a hoe and two sickles as if they'd been dropped so their owners could flee faster. In the moonlight, I glided like a shadow from building to building. I stepped over a spool of thread and saw a knife stuck in a shed. In the center of town, I found a smashed church. Every other house or shed had been intact. Here it seemed as if a giant had kicked out the church's walls. They lay flat, with cracked bricks strewn beyond.

I slunk closer, knelt and let my fingers hover over a hoofprint. My hackles stirred as something growled. In the silent town, the sound was as deadly as the thud of a headman's axe. The growl came from the ruined church, yet nothing was there, not even a ghost. Then the clarity of the growl registered.

I snapped my fingers. *They* still sounded muted.

The invisible creature snarled again-a louder sound than before. Then two green eyes like poison fire appeared in the middle of the ruin. Claws slashed air and disappeared.

I froze in my crouch and time ticked with agonizing slowness. What had that been? A ghost? I strained to hear more. Then a new sensation prickled my neck. I swiveled my head.

The black knight sat on his horse about ten paces from me. Bars blocked his helmeted face and it seemed as if his eyes lacked pupils and were all of one hellish red color. With a muted creak of metal, he

nodded.

I stood and faced him.

"So you're the assassin," he said. His voice sounded distant. "From what the sorcerer says, you've left an impressive trail of bodies."

"I'm the prince of Perugia, signor. This town is part of my land and you're trespassing."

"The Lord of Night would disagree."

"Name yourself," I said.

"Death," he said, "to whoever annoys me."

"You're also Erasmo della Rovere's man?"

He laughed harshly. "He calls you the Darkling, the Moon Lady's champion. But you don't look dangerous to me. Still, this is an age of weaklings. I suppose anything is possible."

"Step down from your horse," I suggested. "Let us test my weakness."

A snarl from the ruined church interrupted his reply.

I strode from the noise, and glanced at the knight. His eyes glowed hotter and then flickered back to their fainter red hue.

He turned to me. "You didn't like that."

"What is it?"

"Stay and find out, O beggarly prince."

I hawked in my throat and spat on the ground. "You're a boor, signor, a black-armored braggart."

He slid the handle of his morningstar from its holder and began to whirl the spiked ball. The warhorse's flanks quivered as if it would spring into a trot.

"I was going to wait until the sorcerer upped the price of your destruction," he said. "Now I find you an annoyance. Better draw your knife, O prince."

Before he charged, the loudest snarl of all came from the ruin. Green eyes blazed, and a spitting thing like a monstrous cat appeared. The beast wriggled as if trying to slither through a hole. Then it spied me and roared.

"The lycanthrope doesn't like you," the knight said.

The lycanthrope flickered, appearing and disappearing like a ghost struggling to exist.

The knight no longer rotated the morningstar, but watched the catlike beast. The beast stared at me with avid longing, and it snarled and wriggled harder than ever.

"You came to collect it," I said.

The knight shrugged with a creak of metal.

A second catlike creature appeared, and a third. I stepped back.

"Not so brave now, are you, O prince?"

“We shall meet again,” I said.

“When we do,” the knight said, “you’ll wish we hadn’t.”

A lycanthrope howled with rage, and it appeared to be solidifying. I nodded curtly to the knight and took my leave.

— 17 -

I refused the evidence. Perugia, Perugia, eagle of the mountains, home to heroes. My city lay in ruins, a ghost town of overgrown vines, rubble and creaking shutters. Skeletons were strewn like fallen leaves. In the great piazza, I found overturned wagons, smashed barrels and skulls. Looters had ransacked my palace. Lichen grew on the walls.

I sat on the lip of a broken fountain, the pigeon-stained statute of Mars minus its arms. After all my haste to return, Perugia was dead. What had become of my old companions in arms? The merchants, the priests, the tanners…they were gone. By the evidence, they might have been gone for years. No. I could not have lain in the swamp for years.

I swiveled my head. A rat scurried across the weedy bricks of the piazza. Motion caught my eye to the right. An owl swooped down. At the last moment, the rat squealed, darted aside and the owl lofted upward as its talons grasped nothing but air.

What had happened to my wife? Where were Francesca and Astorre? I stared at the nearest skeleton. A snake slithered through its ribs. That reminded me that grass had grown through my chainmail. If I'd lain in the swamp years, how had my body survived?

I stood, picked up a chunk of masonry, raised it above my head and hurled it at Mars so it clanged. I lifted another and heaved so the masonry shattered, and I gouged the bronze statue. I drew the deathblade. The dagger was oily and dark. I set the razor-tip against my chest, over my heart. I frowned. My heart no longer beat. Would plunging the deathblade into it kill me? I set the edge against my neck and vaguely realized that it might prove impossible for a man to hew off his own head. I sheathed the knife, took out the silver coin and hefted it. It was my spark of life. Why should I bother to exist if my Laura, my children-

I howled and shook my fist. The urge to hurl the coin pulsed through me. It was an ache, a need, and with a roar, I flung it. The coin glittered in the dark, and it clinked against a ruin across the street.

I gasped, and a spasm caused me to sink to my knees. Good, let me perish. Let me fade into nonexistence. Oh, Laura, oh my darling Francesca. Had Erasmo slit my daughter's throat? What grim evils had he committed upon my son?

Erasmo! He had done this. He had lured me to the swamp. He had planned revenge, and to become a Lord a Night, a ruler of this broken world. He had-

The coin glittered strangely. I heard its siren call. I began to

crawl. Maybe Laura lived. Maybe my children had survived Erasmo's treachery. Yes, Perugia lay ruined. But maybe sorcery had done this in a day. Maybe I hadn't been gone years. I ground my teeth together in fury. There was another place where Erasmo ruled. He held the Tower of the East, whatever that was. Maybe Laura and my children were there.

As I neared the coin, strength flowed into me. I climbed to my feet, hurried to it and picked it off the bricks. I would find this Tower of the East. I would-

A terrible premonition touched me. I glanced at the starry sky. Dawn threatened. What would have happened if the sun had caught me in the open without the coin? I hurried to my old palace, to hide in the dungeon for the day. I would make plans tomorrow night when I revived.

***

I rose the next night and drifted through the ruins until my sorrow hardened into rage. I picked up a skull and stared into the sockets. Erasmo had done this. I set the skull on a table within a house. Rats scurried at the clunk. Vermin ruled Perugia now.

— There came a whispery noise from outside. I hurried to the nearest window, stood flat against the wall and peered out the shutter. There was a flicker in the air like a candle's flame. Yet there was no source for it. The whispery, breezy noise occurred again. I had the sensation that the flicker called with an ethereal voice. I listened carefully. It called for me!

This had been the Angelo District, the people here hardy supporters of House Baglioni. Could one of their spirits have survived the city's destruction? I climbed out the window and approached slowly. The unattached flame stretched taller. Then it zipped to me, circled once and floated near my head.

"Follow," it whispered. Then it drifted down the street.

I drew my blade and followed warily. The faint voice had sounded familiar. Still, Erasmo had lured me into a trap once already. To allow him to do so again would be unbearable.

"Hurry," the flame whispered, and it floated faster.

I lengthened my stride. It soon darted into the Golden Inn, a place much frequented when Perugia lived. As the flame darted to a rear room, it grew into a ghostly outline of a small woman. A cap appeared on her head, one with bells on the ends.

"Lorelei?" I asked.

She beckoned me toward a room, and walked through the door.

I tried the handle. Locked. I pushed, but it was sturdy oak. So I lowered my shoulder and charged. Wood splintered. The heavy door thumped into a dusty room. If I'd breathed, I would have been

coughing amongst all the dust.

Lorelei's ghost pointed at an old chest in the corner. I tried it and found it locked, and smashed a hole with my fist.

"There's a silver dagger," she whispered.

I rummaged through moth-eaten rags until I found it.

"Pick it up, please," she whispered.

I hesitated, and then picked it up. Immediately, her form gained greater substance. Her hat's bells tinkled as she nodded approval.

"Good," she said. "Thank you."

"Lorelei?" I asked.

"This is my wraith."

I frowned.

"That's the wrong nomenclature, isn't it? This is my spirit. I'm locked in the castle, a prisoner of the priestess of the Moon." She grimaced. "Through the ages I've provided for various contingences. If I could send my spirit hither and yon, without aid, I'd be akin to a goddess. The dagger is my focus."

I only half listened. "What happened to my city?"

"The plague began there."

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"Listen-"

"Where's my wife?"

"You've badly frightened Erasmo. There are signs-that doesn't matter." She glanced over her shoulder, faced me again and spoke faster. "He's summoned the black knight-"

"He can't be Orlando Furioso," I said, "Charlemagne's old champion."

"My jailers could interrupt us at any moment. So you must let me talk. I think I've discovered Erasmo's secret. How he found out-that doesn't matter, either. Prince Gian, there are other Earths than ours. How and why this is so I have no idea. Erasmo employed an ancient spell, a terrible and dangerous thing. He opened a door to a destroyed Earth, one where Perugia, Rome, all Italy never existed. Armageddon came early there, or so I suspect."

"That's lunacy," I said.

"Yes," she agreed. "Erasmo took a terrible risk."

"No. The very idea of…of other Earths is madness."

"Maybe you're right," she said. "All I know is that he returned with the Black Death, which he released in Perugia. The millions of dead-you've seen the results. Erasmo and his cohorts now possess a dreadful sorcery, and through it, they reshape men as if they were wax."

"Erasmo must die," I said. "Where is the Tower of the East?"

"He built it on the ruins of Venice."

I swayed. Great Venice with its mighty arsenal, its merchant galleys and sea captains and its maze of canals was gone?

"How did that happen?" I asked.

Lorelei nodded. "Erasmo and the other Lords of Night are reshaping our world. The how is related to his single journey. Yet he lacked the sorcerous power-he plans to return there."

"Return where?" I asked.

"The door lies in Perugia. I'm certain of it. I think Erasmo moves sooner than he wanted. Your appearance has frightened him. The priestess agrees with that. This time he desires help, the reason why he summoned Orlando Furioso. The destroyed Earth is reputed to be a grim place. The journey is perilous, yet the rewards for Erasmo are apparently tremendous."

"You wanted me in Perugia," I said.

"You hate Erasmo, yes?"

"Are you the Moon Lady in disguise?"

"I wish it were so," she said, "for my sake. No. I am the third way, as I told you before."

"I saw the black knight in Velluti," I said. "He came to collect creatures called lycanthropes."

Her spirit paled, becoming fainter so I could see through her.

"Erasmo is mad, as you suggest. Lycanthropes," she shook her head. "Erasmo seeks the Trumpet of Blood. He needs it for his Grand Conjuration. If he can complete it, we, you, the Earth is doomed with him as its new god."

"How do you know all this?" I asked.

"I've heard the oracles," she said. "Listen and you'll understand. '*The first angel sounded his trumpet and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the Earth. A third of the Earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up*.' Erasmo seeks the trumpet used on the dead Earth, the one where Armageddon has already taken place. He must believe he has sufficient sorcerous strength to bring the dread object into our world. How he thinks he could wind it here-"

Lorelei's spirit clutched my wrist, or she tried. Her hand passed through me, although a numbing sensation caused me to drop the silver dagger. She faded as the blade hit wood.

I snatched up the dagger.

"That almost broke the spell," she whispered, her spirit solidifying by degrees. "Don't drop it again."

"Where's my wife? What happened to my children?"

Lorelei turned her head and looked at something I couldn't see. Fear washed over her elfin features. She turned back to me.

"You must stop, Erasmo, or these terrible changes to our world

will become permanent."

Lorelei twisted around, raised her arms and spoke a harsh word. The knife grew hot. I let go, and as it fell, I saw Lorelei as she stood in a small room. A door opened there. I think it was in the castle that grew. I glimpsed a silver robe. Then the dagger clunked onto the table and Lorelei, the room and the image of the moon priestess vanished.

***

I climbed rotted stairs and seemed to have developed a sense for which ones would creak. Those I avoided. It was slow going, but soon I reached a trapdoor. I pushed, and winced as the hinges *s-q-u-e-a-l-e-d*. Above me, a startled bat flapped away.

I crawled into a watchtower that was moldy with bat guano. Floorboards groaned at my weight. I reached an arch filthy with webs. In the corner, a spider bit the thorax of a squirming bug. I concentrated on the road outside Perugia's main gate.

The black knight had hobbled his horse there and tended a fire. Strange creatures crouched nearby, although farther away from the flames. Two lay like lions, curled in sleep. A third hunched like a primitive man and gnawed on a bone.

Lorelei's spirit…could I believe her? I believed the black knight knew the whereabouts of my wife and children. I would trail him and await my opportunity to touch him with my knife and learn exactly where Laura was. And if Erasmo arrived, I'd kill him.

I wondered if the ruins frightened them enough so they waited until daylight to enter. Their actions seemed to say I was the evil creature that haunted Perugia. I studied the stars. There was less than an hour of night left. I decided to in the tower during the day.

Soon, the knight took off his armor and stretched out on a cloak. The lycanthropes slunk into nearby thickets. Then I knew no more, forced under my cloak as the sun rose.

— 18-

A bat stretched furry wings and let go of its perch. Because it had slept hanging upside-down, the little creature dropped. Before it struck the floorboards, it shot out the arch and into the starry night.

I eased up and peered toward the city gate.

The black knight saddled his horse. Half again larger than lions, the lycanthropes paced. One growled what sounded like words. The distance made it impossible to understand his speech.

The knight hoisted himself into the saddle. It was the first time I'd really seen him move. He mounted with grace, with strength, as the real Orlando might have done. He flicked the reins and cantered toward the gate. The lycanthropes slunk after him.

I hurried down the stairs. Maybe an hour later, I heard the knight and his horse and I climbed a pitted wall. Like a vulture, I crouched on a slate roof, hidden by a gargoyle statue.

The lycanthropes padded into view. They were thinner than lions, but had a big cat's silky way of trotting. They sniffed wolf-like and growled among themselves, giving off the sense of speech. The knight followed on his horse. He held his morningstar and a triangular black shield. His hellish eyes glowed with sinister purpose and he glanced back and forth. The clop of hooves echoed in the ruins, and they passed underneath my gargoyle, the lycanthropes first.

I tensed and slowly drew my deathblade. I could drop like a vampire onto the knight, knock him off the horse and stab between the bars of his visor. But the armor looked sturdy, and I dreaded the idea of snapping my knife against it. Suppose he turned his head, or suppose he was really Orlando Furioso, the world's greatest knight. The fight might take time. Would the lycanthropes simply watch?

The horse clopped past my hiding spot. The spike on the knight's helmet looked sharp. I sheathed the deathblade. After they turned the corner, I dropped onto the street and hurried after them. I would have to whittle down the odds before I faced the black knight.

It galled me to slink like a thief in my own city, but I trailed them. I knew the shortcuts. That helped. I wanted to ring the city bells and call out the guard, but the guards were dead and someone had stolen the bells. So I peered around corners, climbed buildings and watched from glassless windows.

Once, the lycanthropes howled in chorus. I lay on a roof across from the Golden Inn. An eight-foot giant with a grotesque face and great hairy shoulders slunk out of the inn. His apish arms almost dangled to his knees. He would be a formidable foe. He held the silver knife, Lorelei's keepsake. He held it by the end of the hilt as if it was

poisonous. He flung it so it clattered onto paving.

"Who held it?" asked the knight.

The giant shrugged furry shoulders. Was he a lycanthrope? Were they shape-changers?

"Did a man or a woman hold it?" the knight asked.

The primitive giant cast a hateful glance at the knife. The lycanthropes, the other two, kept far from it. I suspected then that it was true what people said about silver weapons. They had a deadlier effect on such creatures than regular iron.

"Sniff it," the knight said.

The giant made a face. But he bent down, put his hairy palms on the paving and leaned his nose near the knife. From where I lay, I heard him sniff.

"I sense a woman," the giant growled.

"Is there any blood?" asked the knight.

"No."

"Why did she leave it?"

"I'm not an astrologer," the giant said. He sounded angry.

The knight chuckled, which I thought odd.

"Is your laughter a slur?" the giant asked.

"You can't slur dogs."

The giant hunched his shoulders, and he growled.

"Instead of calling you a dog, would you rather I called you a wizard?" the knight asked.

"We three are brothers of the fang," the giant said. "We are hunters."

"Dogs," the knight said.

The giant snarled. One of the others snarled back. The humanoid beast stood to his imposing height. "Dogs are hunters. Dogs are good. Wizards hide behind spells."

"Dogs hunt," the knight agreed.

"Then you did not insult me?"

As if bored with the conversation, the knight stood up in the stirrups and scanned the street.

As he watched the knight, the giant's lips drew back. He stepped toward the armored man.

I cursed under my breath. I was across the street and atop a building. If they fought among themselves, this was my chance. I debated jumping down and attacking.

The horse's head swiveled around then. The giant stopped and flexed his grotesque hands, hesitating. The knight settled back in his saddle, patted the horse's neck and chuckled. He did it in a way that said he knew exactly what was going on. The giant fell into a crouch, and in the shadows, he blurred. A moment later, he trotted away in

beast form.

"Dogs," the knight said. He clucked his tongue. The horse followed the sniffing pack.

I crept down the stairs and hurried out the back. I had a good idea which way they went. Maybe I could finally ambush them. Unfortunately, I guessed wrong, and was forced to continue my shadowy game. They dissected the ruins in efficient patterns, and after scouring one district, they began in another. Like a persistent cough, I remained near them throughout, waiting for my chance.

"Rabbits, foxes and rats," a lycanthrope said later.

I peered from a window on a third floor. It was an ancient tenement building from Roman times. Tanners had lived here, workers in the leather guild. It was in the Bettona District, a former stronghold of republican sentiment and a hotbed for those hostile to Baglioni rule.

"You're certain you haven't smelled a woman's tracks?" the knight asked.

All three lycanthropes shook their heads. All three were in animal form.

The knight leaned toward them and spoke in a dangerous voice. "Have you smelled anything else?"

"Rabbits, foxes-"

The knight made a curt gesture. "Forget about animals."

"There is a dead thing-"

"You fool!" the knight said. "What dead thing?"

The three lycanthropes exchanged glances.

"None may insult us," the chief lycanthrope said.

The red eyes behind the knight's visor seemed to glow hotter.

"…It is very faint," the chief lycanthrope said, "hints of a dead thing. You said to tell of scents."

"So tell me," the knight said.

"Why worry about carrion?"

In the third storey room, I flexed my hands. They were powerful, whole. If the lycanthrope spoke about my scent, he was wrong. I'd seen carrion before, rotted flesh. I had nothing in common with it.

The knight peered down the street; he peered up it. He examined the relics of buildings. "Your noses are legendary," he told the beasts. "You can track anything. But you lack wit. If you desire to return home with important scalps, you must tell me everything."

"Even dead things?" the lycanthrope asked.

"Did you smell it in more than one place?" the knight asked.

"It is faint."

"You mean it's an old scent?" the knight asked.

"It's like a whisper that is hard to hear."

“Is it old?”

“It is hard because here there are many dead scents.”

“You’re the lycanthropes,” the knight said.

“That is why it is hard to explain it to you. Death once squatted here and has tainted the trails.” The lycanthrope shook his head. “This is an evil place with haunted scents.”

“But among them,” the knight said, “you smell this dead thing?”

“That is so.”

“Is the scent in many places?”

“It is very faint,” the lycanthrope said.

“Answer my question, beast.”

The lycanthrope’s eyes became dark. “We are not beasts. We are shape-changers, the Chosen.”

“And your noses are legendary,” the knight said. “Did you smell this thing in many places?”

“…It is possible.”

The horse snorted and shook its head.

“A predator likely dragged the carrion,” the lycanthrope said. “That is why we smelled it in-”

“What predator?” the knight asked in a contemptuous voice.

“This world has many predators. This we know. Bears, leopards, wolves-”

“What predators have you smelled here?”

“The carrion must-”

“What hunters?” the knight demanded.

“Foxes, owls and-”

“Foxes dragged this so-called carrion? Is that what you’re saying?”

The lycanthrope blinked. Then he turned to his brothers of the fang. They snarled back and forth between themselves.

The knight whistled sharply so the lycanthropes spun toward him.

“Our paymaster has deadly enemies both open and hidden,” the knight said. “Among them are powers unwise to name. Some do not approve of his ends. Among them are those who can cause the dead to walk.”

“This is ill news,” the lycanthrope said.

“To the superstitious it may be,” the knight said. “Dead or alive, all things fall to me. Since you are with me, you need not fear dead things. But you must tell me what you smell, even if it is faint.”

“We only hunt the living. We fear nothing that lives.”

“Your courage is legendary, of course. I want to know what this faint smell means. We will track it and find out.”

“Spells are needed against dead-things-that-walk. But only weaklings use spells. Lycanthropes are strong. Forget the faint scent.

That is my advice."

"The paymaster did not seek you because this thing is easy," the knight said. "Honor comes from great exploits. It is faint, you say. Maybe what made it is gone. Maybe it is here, hidden like a wraith, watching us."

I needed a crossbow, a heavy one. Then I could put a bolt through the knight's brain.

The lycanthrope lowered his head, and he snarled at his companions. They traded sly glances and soon snarled softly.

"We hunt," the lycanthrope agreed.

I heard the deceit. They feared me as most normal people had so far. No doubt, the black knight also heard their deceit. He sat back in his saddle. After a time, he slotted the morningstar and scratched the horse's neck.

"Did you smell this faint scent on the silver knife?" the knight asked.

"…Yes," the lycanthrope said.

The knight lowered his helmeted head. Then he looked up sharply at my building.

With slow deliberation, I eased back out of sight. When I heard a jangle and clank of armor, I eased forward to the window.

The knight had dismounted. He unbuckled a saddlebag and withdrew three objects: a clothbound thing, a scroll and an ivory box.

"Keep quiet," he told the lycanthropes. "Don't ask questions until I'm done. This is delicate work and I can't afford any mistakes. Do you understand?"

"Should we hunt?"

"No," the knight said. "Just keep out of my way and don't make noise."

The three beasts slunk to the broken fountain of Mars where they crouched and muttered together.

The knight took off his gauntlets, knelt and opened the scroll, weighing down the ends with stones. He unwound the cloth to reveal a dagger and scratched lines into the cobblestones that soon took on an elaborate shape. Then he opened the ivory box and took out six candles. He set them in various places, rose, stretched and crackled his knuckles. Finally, he took a long stick from the saddlebag and scratched the tip against paving. The tip burst into flame.

The lycanthropes had quit muttering. They lay by the fountain, their necks stretched as they watched the proceedings.

The knight lit each candle in turn, maybe in a special sequence. He shook out the lit stick and picked up the scroll. The massive horse clopped to him and peered over his shoulder.

I caught a whiff of the candles. They smelled like burnt human.

Worse, I heard faint screams, and I thought in one of the flickers to see a tortured ghost-face.

The knight cleared his throat and read aloud from the scroll. A flame whooshed from the tallest candle. It flickered high and the wax melted and flowed into the etched lines. Then the air above the etching became hazy and filled with billowing smoke. The smoke began to take shape as if under a sculptor's chisel. A forehead appeared, the bridge of a nose, lips, chin-no, it was a spade-shaped beard.

With a start, I realized it was my face, although I presently lacked a beard. Had the knight used a spell to locate me?

Before I could flee, the smoke-face opened its eyes. It smiled. What a sly smile. What an arrogant stare. Then it came to me. The smoke-face wasn't mine. Well, it was. But it showed Erasmo in my likeness. The lips parted. He spoke with a puff of smoke as on a wintry day.

"The ruins are secure?" Erasmo asked.

The knight bowed his helmeted head as one does to a high official. "The lycanthropes have prowled Perugia, signor. They found a silver knife, but no traces of a woman's trail."

"Indeed," Erasmo said. "And…?"

"They smelled a faint trace of what they called 'a dead thing'."

The smoky lips compressed and the smoky eyes narrowed.

"The lycanthropes refuse to track it, signor."

"Is it the Darkling?"

"The lycanthropes say it is a faint scent."

"You doubt the lycanthropes?" Erasmo asked.

"They fear these ruins, signor."

A smoke-hand appeared and stroked the rippling beard. "Can I trust you, Signor Orlando?"

"I desire Durendal and Angelica's whereabouts, Your Excellency."

The wavering face broke into an evil smile. "I must live for you to gain those," Erasmo said.

"You will live, signor. This I assure you."

"How long will the portal burn?"

The knight glanced at the etching, shrugged.

The smoky hand vanished. The head nodded. "Give me ten minutes."

"That will be cutting it very near," the knight said.

"I need to gather an amulet and a key. They're in the high tower. Make certain I face no unwarranted surprises."

"How many will you bring, signor?"

"I have you and you have the lycanthropes. That will be enough."

"They won't dig," the knight said.

The head laughed, and then the smoke dissipated.

Erasmo came to Perugia? I flexed my hands as a bitter smile stretched my lips. I would throttle him until his face turned purple.

The black knight called the lycanthropes. They raced to him. He spoke urgently, but too quietly for me to hear. A lycanthrope glanced up at my building. The knight spoke curtly. The lycanthrope lowered his head.

In seven swift strides, I stood before another window ninety degrees from the one I'd just used. I leaped and landed in a crouch atop a two-storey ruin. Unfortunately, the wall complained.

Lycanthropes shouted from within my former building. They were fast, but I'd been faster.

I scuttled like a crab on all fours. My foot shot through rotted roofing. I lay flat, slithered out of danger and made it to the other side. I leaped again, dangled from the new roof and dropped into the alley. I dodged around corners and shimmied up a lead pipe attached to a church. The church had angled roofs. I hid among them and listened, but heard nothing.

Had I lost them? Possibly.

Erasmo was coming. And he had called the knight Signor Orlando. That was flatly impossible. Yet they had spoken about Durendal. Durendal was the name of Orlando's magic sword. I'd often read about it in the poems concerning the greatest of legendary knights. Was the black knight the same paladin then who had fought in Charlemagne's host? If so, how had he survived the centuries? Was he immortal like Lorelei? Whoever this Orlando was, the lycanthropes feared him and Erasmo employed him.

Erasmo was coming to Perugia.

I eased from my position and soon dropped into another alley. I had to act before Erasmo came. Now more than ever, I needed to whittle down the odds.

— 19-

I peered around a corner into the piazza. The knight sat on his horse near the fountain. Both mount and rider scanned back and forth. The lycanthropes troubled me because they remained hidden.

I watched from a distance, and found myself glancing at the candles circling the pattern. With a start, I heard paws padding. The sound came from around the corner. The footfalls paused. Someone sniffed. I swear I heard dust fluff and resettle onto the ground. The lycanthrope had to be just around the corner, hidden in that dead spot as concerned my vision. The candle and pattern were across the street at an angle from me. He sniffed again as if not daring to believe his first scent.

Several candles leaped with flame, consumed in an instant. A boot and trouser appeared out of nowhere and stepped onto the pattern.

The night grew dimmer, a chill made me tremble. I drew my blade and stepped around the corner.

A lycanthrope in beast form had turned his head to watch Erasmo's arrival. Something must have alerted him. The beast's head began to whip about. I thrust as if my dagger were a rapier. The oily blade entered his neck. I could feel skin, gristle and muscle come apart. The lycanthrope's turning forced the knife deeper. Smoke curled from the wound. The lycanthrope's jaws parted. He began to howl, and his hindquarters tensed. I slashed downward, ripping his throat. He leaped. Claws flicked out of his paws. I dove, hit the dirt with my shoulder and rolled. My bloody knife was free and tucked near my chest. The claws flashed past me by inches. The lycanthrope's body followed his claws. I continued the roll. My feet hit the ground. I stood and pivoted. The lycanthrope's front paws hit the ground. His body followed, and it crumpled as blood jetted from his neck. His ghastly howl tore at my soul.

I looked right, left. The other lycanthropes burst into view across the street. The black knight was in mid-shout. I leapt over the fallen lycanthrope as a hard grin stretched my lips. I'd whittled down the odds.

The knight shouted. Lycanthropes howled, and Erasmo della Rovere joined us in the Perugian ruins.

***

I dreaded the idea that Erasmo would retreat to the Tower of the East.

I gazed at the gibbous moon as I stood on my palace. I could have soaked in its rays for hours. Instead, I pinned on my cloak and began

the descent. On soft boots, I returned to the piazza, although from a new direction.

Erasmo stood before a flickering brazier. He looked like me, a big man in blue and gold garments, with a blue cloak and golden boots. An amulet hung on his chest, a black gem with a flame deep in its center. He chanted loudly. The black knight waited nearby, hunched upon his horse. The remaining lycanthropes padded back and forth on the street and snarled to each other, watching everywhere.

Erasmo poured blood from a golden cup into the brazier. It sizzled and a rank vapor whooshed skyward. His chant rose to a shriek.

The horse neighed. The lycanthropes cringed.

A dread sense of evil rooted me. I looked at the stars. Several had become cold like icicles. The twinkles became sinister like a lone heart beating on a table. Erasmo sang high octaves in a language never meant for human throats. The brazier cracked. Half-clotted blood oozed from it.

The lycanthropes tucked their tails between their legs and cowered on the ground.

Erasmo raised his arms. He chanted.

A wind blew in Perugia. I clutched my cloak so it wouldn't flap. A strangely luminous green fog flowed past the fountain of Mars. The lycanthropes slunk from it. The knight's horse backed up. The mist flowed deeper into the ruins. It poured into a building. Masonry and dust rained as the building shook. Then all was still, solemnly quiet as after an earthquake.

Erasmo stood as one dazed, as one who had run a long race. He ran his fingers through his hair and straightened his jacket. Then he approached the lycanthropes. The flame in Erasmo's amulet seemed larger than before and more active. I had the awful impression that it watched alertly like a guard dog, flickering here, flickering there.

"We will mourn your companion later," Erasmo said. "Now we go."

"Leave us, spell worker," the chief lycanthrope said, his voice filled with grief.

Erasmo's features tightened, although he nodded slowly. "Grief is noble. However, I need you now, just as you need me."

The lycanthrope put a paw on his dead brother, the one I'd slain. "We need no spells."

"You wish to return home, yes?" Erasmo asked.

The lycanthrope's head turned toward Erasmo. The beast's nape hairs bristled.

Erasmo's right hand jerked toward the amulet. His fingertips brushed it. "Think well before you threaten me, beast, even

indirectly."

Although I hated to admit it, Erasmo wore my likeness well. He had evil majesty, the bastard.

The lycanthrope lowered his head and spoke with contrition. "He was our brother, great one."

"To honor him," Erasmo said, "I will load you with bloody scalps and whatever else you wish to name. I am generous to those who serve me. But to those who set themselves against me, even in small things, I am a terror."

"Can you punish the evil thing for what it did?" the lycanthrope asked.

Erasmo stroked his spade-shaped beard. "Do you wish its scalp?"

"Yes! Give it to me."

"Done," Erasmo said. "After we return, we shall hunt the world for him. Now let us be about our task. The way is open, but only for tonight. We must hurry, for we have far to go."

The lycanthropes traded glances. The chief opened his jaws, perhaps to point out that granting a thing hadn't yet produced it.

Erasmo already gave instructions to the black knight. Then he set out at a brisk pace for the building the mist had entered.

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I watched the building from hiding, suspecting a trap. They knew I was here. Erasmo had promised the lycanthropes my scalp. The more I considered it, however, the less certain I became. Erasmo had given me no consideration other than as a future promise to the lycanthropes.

The building was silent and dark, but was it empty? It was of brick and mortar construction, with iron-grilled balconies on the second floor. The weather-beaten sign had eroded beyond readability. Yet I knew it. The Alchemist Shop.

I approached from a back alley and like a shadow vectored toward a window. Every sense strained.

I crawled through the window. Heavy tables held dust and broken glass. Some tables lay on their sides. By the shrouds of cobwebs, I knew no one had entered here for ages. I moved softly, careful to avoid particles of glass. One crunch could give me away. The next room smelled dusty for good reason. Paw-prints mixed with hoof marks showed me their trail. I followed through a corridor, into a large room and to a solid wall, and there the tracks disappeared.

I doubted they had become spirits like Lorelei. I ran my fingertips along the brick wall. Toppled benches, low tables and iron discs lay strewn on either side of the trail. Each thing had lain for ages. Except…I noticed coins that had recently made a dusty path of their own, maybe made it only minutes ago. By the extent of their journey,

it seemed the wall had shoved the coins.

If a pivot stood here in the wall…

I went to the opposite side as the iron coins. I ran my fingers along the base, the ceiling, the corner. Ah, I noticed footprints and followed them to a niche in a sidewall. There was a candleholder in it. I tugged. It resisted. The bottom of the candleholder had a cunning hinge, hard to see right away. I tugged harder. It moved, and something clicked. I hurried to the wall and pushed. It swiveled on a hidden pivot, and I thought *counterweights*. My end went in. The other end swung outward, and I saw how the wall had shoved the iron coins. The alchemists had been cunning artificers.

Ah! There were the paw and hoof prints. I entered the secret room, and my shin brushed a stretched wire. There came a soft click. To the sides, steel cords twanged.

I would have died there, but I was the Darkling. Before I understood my danger, before my mind recognized the threat, I threw myself toward the floor with catlike reflexes. A crossbow bolt hissed overhead. Another kissed my leathers. The third punched into my thigh. It slued my leg that way and pivoted my torso the other.

I clamped my teeth together at the pain. Whoever had designed the trap had taken into account someone like me.

The bolt had missed bone and entered into the fleshy back of my thigh. I slithered to the wall, but the trap had swung it shut. I leaned against the wall and felt my thigh. My night-vision was useless in a pitch-black room. The bolt had sunk deeply. I clutched it, and yanked.

A groan tore from my throat. Thankfully, it was a smooth-pointed bolt, not barbed. I pressed the flesh against bone. Sticky substance oozed out, but it wasn't blood. In a matter of seconds, the oozing stopped.

I found the tripwire and slid my hand to one end. I discovered a mechanism, and by fiddling, reopened the wall. I limped outside and bathed in the healing moonlight.

Erasmo must have known about the trap beforehand. That he knew implied that he and the alchemists had been partners. How deep had the conspiracy run?

I shook my head. What did it matter now?

I tested my leg. It was stiff, sore and partly healed. I limped into the Alchemist Shop, followed the trail, clicked the candle and warily entered the secret room. I used flint and tinder and lit an old torch. There were cages in here. Each held a chained skeleton inside. I followed the dusty trail. The corridor led past doors. One room had stacks of iron ingots. Another had thumbscrews and racks. I ignored the doors thereafter. The corridor led to stone steps sized for giants. They led down.

A faint stir of air startled me. I drew my knife and limped down the stairs. They curved and went farther than I expected. They ended at damp soil where ancient barrels held a meeting. I lifted the torch. At the end of the cellar, timbers shored up the earth like a mineshaft. Not more caves. I hated caves.

Tracks showed me they had used the mineshaft. Screwing up my resolve, I followed after them. My shoulders hunched of their own accord and my muscles tightened. I moved warily. Lorelei had spoken about doors to another Earth, a ruined place. Maybe she had really meant a gateway to Hell. Several twists later brought me before an ironbound door. Its hinges were as long as my forearm. I remembered Erasmo had told the knight he had to bring a key. Maybe the key had been for this door.

I sheathed my knife and limped to the door. The handle was icy cold and a terrible sense of doom filled me, of wrongness. I shrank back. I hated the door. It was profoundly evil. If Lorelei was right, Erasmo had used it once and returned with the plague. He had begun the hideous dying in Perugia. If Lorelei was right, a dead Earth waited on the other side, together with an olden trumpet of doom. How could there be other Earths?

“He stole your wife,” I whispered.

I snarled, and tugged at the door. It was stuck fast. I looked around and wormed the end of my torch into a rocky crack. Then I put both hands on the handle, and I heaved. The door slid open an inch. I yanked again, and used my newfound strength, the one that had allowed me to lift a wagon full of corpses. The heavy door slid open several more inches. I peered through the narrow opening. There was nothing but swirling blackness on the other side-a strange vertigo that hurt my eyes.

I retrieved the torch and thrust it through. The tunnel was cast into pitch-blackness. I pulled the torch back, but the flame was out. I put my hand where the flame had been, but didn’t feel any heat. I touched the charred wood. The flame had gone out long ago.

I tossed the guttered torch aside and listened to it clatter. Then I plunged through the door, the gateway to a dead Earth.

— 20-

I landed on sand and rolled. I scrambled upright, drew my knife and whirled around. With shocked horror, I saw nothing but dreary sand with the ghastliness of salt. The sand shifted in slow tides. Far on the bleak horizon were the Alps. Yet they lacked snow or any sign of greenery. To the left I spied a razed town, its ruined towers the sole sentinels of this shifting desolation. The worst was the sky. A vast and looming moon filled a quarter of it. The moon was a burnt husk, and despite its abominable size only gave off faint light. Then a comet blazed or a falling star. It burned in the heavens and I heard a distant roar before it vanished into the horizon. Seconds later the ground shook, maybe at its impact. Other fiery stars streaked overhead, illuminating this fallen world.

How could I return without a door? How could Erasmo return? Or had the door been a trap?

Then I noticed a haze before me. A particularly intense comet illuminated it. It was the door.

I backed away and almost tripped over a man. He lay staked down, with his ankles and wrists cruelly bound with wire. His eyes bulged in death. He had bitten off his tongue. With sick loathing, I recognized him. It was Erasmo's father. The implications were perverse.

I sheathed my knife. The heavens roared and light filled the sky. I slumped at the dazzling display. It was too bright. The impact exploded upon my ears and the ground trembled like an earthquake. Moments later, the air shrieked and the heat became unbearable.

I struggled to control my terror. I was Prince Gian Baglioni of Perugia, a patron of the arts and a member of the ongoing Renaissance. I had reason. I must use it. So I scrambled after Erasmo's tracks. Sand had already drifted into them or been blasted into them. This was a desperate place. Erasmo was mad or indeed consumed with lust for power.

The first angel must have long ago winded his trumpet, along with the second, third and fourth angels blowing theirs. Wrath and judgment had fallen on this world. The comets must be the finishing act, the period that capped this Earth's doom.

I followed their tracks and ran, until in the distance I saw specks. One speck was bigger than the others, the black knight on his horse, no doubt.

Three times comet-born blasts hurled me from my feet. The endless tides of this dreadful world worked to obliterate every sign of life. When I rose from the third blast, the specks were gone.

I hurried, fed a trickle of strength from this world's bloated moon. Finally, I came to a huge fissure, a cyclopean zigzag in the sands. Had the others entered the fissure? Faint tracks said yes.

I slipped over the edge. Fortunately, the way was not straight down, and soon I trudged at a steep angle. I passed smaller fissures, jagged scarps and gray boulders. The falling stars that passed overhead briefly lit the area like a dim sun. I followed paw-prints and boot marks. There were no more hoof prints, however. The horse hadn't entered the fissure. Of that, I was certain. I wondered what had happened to it.

An agonized howl focused my attention. I moved from nook to scarp to boulder. The ground trembled. Rocks loosened and rattled downward. Air screamed across the fissure like a colossus blowing pipes. We were all insane to be here.

A lycanthrope howled again. The knight grumbled, but I couldn't hear his actual words.

I stretched out on a gray boulder. Fifty feet down the lycanthropes in humanoid form crouched forlornly like primitives, with their long arms wrapped around their knees. The black knight crunched across sand as he paced back and forth. He carried his triangular shield and morningstar. Erasmo-

I saw the hole, the dug up sand and dirt around it. Erasmo must have squeezed into the hole. With all these quakes, didn't he fear cave-ins?

The lycanthropes rocked to-and-fro. One whined.

"Quiet," the knight said.

"We must leave," whined the lycanthrope.

"Soon," the knight said.

"Not soon," the lycanthrope said. "He will never find it, never. We must leave."

The knight kept pacing.

The lycanthrope lifted his head and howled.

Did I wait until Erasmo climbed out of the hole or did I go in after him? Why did it always have to be about holes and caves? I might try to hit Erasmo with a stone as he emerged. Could I trust the others to just sit there and wait? The lycanthropes might catch my scent. The black knight had supernatural senses.

I selected a stone and hurled it high and long. It was a simple stratagem. I counted on their fear, their hatred of this place. The stone hit with a thud.

"What was that?" a lycanthrope cried.

"The wizard said this world was dead," whined the other.

"Quit jawing about it," the knight said, "and follow me."

The lycanthropes scrambled to their feet and slunk after the

knight. Whatever else Signor Orlando was, he was brave. He clanked in a determined stride, his shield ready and the spiked ball of his morningstar swinging from side to side.

I had little time and couldn't afford to expose myself long. Anyone of them might glance back. To work down the boulder and the escarpment would take too long. I judged the hole, and I knew I was mad. It must have been this world.

I jumped, plummeted and landed soundlessly. As a normal man, I would have at least broken an ankle and probably thudded in an inelegant sprawl. My Darkling-sight showed me that this was more than a gopher-like hole. The opening revealed a cave. I hesitated because of it. Then I spied torchlight as if it flickered off a cave wall. I drew my knife and dashed in for the kill.

***

I heard fingernails scratch rock. I heard grunts and hard breathing.

"You've got to be here, you whore," Erasmo said low under his breath. The words echoed in the cave. "All the signs…the portents…. You're here. I know it."

I nodded. Erasmo had always been impatient.

The cave trembled. Sand rained from the low ceiling. A dislodged stone from the ceiling struck my neck. It made my gut clench with terror so it was hard to keep going. A second later, the digging resumed. That helped unlock me, although I found it impossible to rush in. The best I could manage was a slinking shuffle.

Unlike our boyhood treasure hunt, this time Erasmo dug. Would he have become a crazed sorcerer if my axe hadn't chopped his foot? Yet a ruined foot wasn't reason enough to push a man to these extremes. What had urged Erasmo to stake down his own father? Why had his father been here with him?

"Where are you-" Erasmo grew silent as the scratching quit. A wild laugh tore out of his throat.

Now was the moment. I glided around rock.

Erasmo had dug into the side of the cave. The end of his torch was thrust into sand. It flickered and shadows jumped and writhed on the walls. He knelt and tugged at something in the hole.

"Need some help?" I asked.

He looked up wild-eyed, noticed my dagger and licked his lips in his obscene manner.

"Gian!" he said. "I can bring you back to life again. I can break the Moon Lady's hold over you."

"But can you restore my dignity?"

He laughed nervously. "If you join me, I can make you a god."

"You wear my likeness," I said. "You've stained my good name by

being me. How can you restore that?"

He brought his hands out of the hole. "We used to be friends."

"Where's Laura? Tell me, and I'll make your passing quick."

"Gian," he said, and he eased his right hand upward.

I lunged. He twisted like an eel and hurled himself back. My knife sliced his shoulder. He screamed. Smoke billowed. And the amulet on his chest flared with brilliance. I'm not certain what happened next. His back thudded against a wall. The flame within his black amulet, the flickering tip, zeroed in on me. I leaped after him and a flash blew me backward. At least, that's what I thought at first. Then I saw the living flame. It had legs, arms and a fire head. It sizzling self lit up the small confines of the cave and poured heat. It was smaller than me, and it watched with eyes that shined like the sun. It blocked me from my old friend.

I made ready to stab the living flame. It took a step at me and raised fiery arms.

"Hold," Erasmo told it. "Gian, drop the knife. Kneel, and give me fealty, and I'll let you live."

I flung a stone, one of several that I carried in a pouch. It lifted a lock of his hair and clicked against the cave wall behind him.

Erasmo shifted behind the flame. "Don't you understand?" he shouted. "I'm a Lord of Night. If I say the word, my flame will destroy you."

"You had me chained to an altar," I said. "You stabbed me in the guts. But I'll always keep coming. I'm remorseless as death."

"Lay down your knife and I'll give you life again," he said. "I'll give you Laura, your children."

"Where are they?"

"In a safe place. But you have to kneel *now*, Gian. Pitch your knife to where I can see it. I'm losing patience."

"You're playing for time," I said. "You're hoping the black knight will save you, the lycanthropes."

Erasmo peered around the flame's shoulder. I faked a throw. Erasmo ducked like a ferret. I laughed and the flame cackled brighter, angrily, it seemed.

"Don't do that again," Erasmo said, "or I'll unleash the flame. He'll burn you to death. I don't want that, Gian. I want your help. I know you don't believe me, but I wish to learn about the Moon Lady. You can tell me things I don't know about her."

"What did you promise your father?" I asked.

"…That was a mistake. I admit it, although if you knew the circumstances, you'd realize I had no choice."

"No. We can always turn from evil. Fight me, Erasmo. Wash away your guilt with your blood. It will be like old times, just you and me

in the sand arena. You always wanted to be a knight. Now is your chance to die like one."

"You fool. Don't you understand what would happen to you if you actually won? The door to our Earth would close. You'd be trapped here. Doomed. I've opened the door with spells that took years to learn. The Moon Lady sent you after me, but she doesn't care if you survive. You're a javelin she has hurled at me. I'm your path to life. Or do you want to die on this dead world?"

I leaped at the living flame, smashed my shoulder against it. The flame staggered back. It had weight like a man. My garments smoldered from the contact. Then I was past it. Unfortunately, its flames blurred my vision. I stabbed at Erasmo, felt flesh part and heard him groan. Then flaming hands latched onto my shoulders and heaved. I sailed and smashed against rock.

The cave trembled then-from a comet, not from me. Sand and stones rained down. Before I could scramble up, the flame aimed its clenched fists. Fire licked upon me. I bellowed in agony and my flesh bubbled, and I tried to crawl away. Through a haze of pain and dazzling brightness, I spotted Erasmo. He clutched his smoking side as blood dripped between his fingers. He spoke a harsh word. The living flame turned from me. I groaned at the pain, at the throb of my fried flesh. Erasmo spoke again. The flame leaped at him, dwindled and sank into the black gem, which I realized had been dark during the fight. Now a flame flickered in the gem as it angrily watched me.

Through the stink of my cooked flesh, I dragged myself at Erasmo. Agony lanced my scorched forearms. It throbbed upon my face. I could only see out the right side. The left must have melted into something hideous.

Erasmo raised a bloody hand as his features contorted with hatred. He spoke with painful wheezes, so I know my cut had hurt him.

"You spoke about my father. He begged me to stop. And once he realized I despised his advice, he tried to free the plague before I could drag it to our Earth. The plague was in a lead casket, a forgotten doom, I suppose. It had never been used on this wretched Earth. We had gone through Hell to find it and had slain an ancient guardian to make it ours-mine! But I didn't need him anymore. He'd served his purpose. So I killed him, staked him in the sand as a marker and created a spell to blow off whatever drifted onto him. Do you know why I refused his cries of mercy?"

"Come whisper it in my ear," I said.

"He made me accept your apology after you'd maimed me with your axe. He shouldn't have done that, Gian."

I'd never reach him. So I raised myself from the floor, picked up a

stone and heaved. He grunted, and staggered against the wall. I'd aimed at his head but hit his chest. Only having a single eye had marred my accuracy.

He raised a hand and panted a chant. I groped for another stone. The cave shook as I grasped it, and the cave above me collapsed. With a horrible *shushing* sound, tons of sand poured down. Like a giant fist, it smashed, pinned and then buried me alive.

Only vaguely, did I hear Erasmo or even understand. It came as if from far away.

"Burning to death is agony. But for you, Gian, lingering in deathlessness buried alive is worse." He might have stamped upon my tomb. "Think on that, assassin."

***

I struggled for mastery of my terrorized emotions. My flesh throbbed with searing hurt, and my worst fear had arrived. I think I screamed. Sand filled my mouth. Sand surrounded me. I could not move.

In the blackness, in my tome, the fiery pain eventually dwindled to gray agony. I had no idea the length of time that took. I was alone, trapped beyond anyone's help. I wanted to weep. Erasmo surely hurried to the door to Earth. He would shut it, lock it and resume being me as a Lord of Night. I'd miserably failed. The Moon Lady's assassin, the killer in the dark, the famed Darkling-it was a moronic jest.

I tried to thrash. It was impossible. There was no air to scream. I was as good as a corpse, and on a dead world. I should have struck first, not talked. I'd tried to be clever. Successful assassins were ruthless. I'd acted more like a knight, a prince.

With a wrench of will, I shook out those thoughts. I had to act. Act? What could I do?

With all my strength, I tried to heave upward. Blackness threatened my coherence. I relaxed as much as a man could with horrible burns. Was this it then?

I tried to wriggle my fingers. One moved! Hideous excitement almost overcame me. Concentrating, it was terribly difficult, I began to dig with a slow rotation of my hands. Torments threatened my thoughts. They came as fears, pain and a mindless yammering that almost destroyed my focus. Digging was tediously slow. So would be a recounting of it. Eventually, like a grave worm, I slithered out of the sand and into the trembling cave.

It reminded me that outside striking comets blew sand everywhere. I cackled laughter, and spat out dirt. Did I really think I could find Erasmo's tracks? And what did it matter if I could? I might have traded my soul to the Moon Lady if she could have helped me

then. I didn't want to die on a strange Earth, a dead world waiting for its final destruction. I was an alien here. If I died, would I go to its Hell or Heaven?

Died! I cackled more mad laughter. Then I snapped my mouth shut.

"Crawl, Gian. Keep fighting."

I wanted to hoot derision at myself. Instead, I dragged my battered torso toward the cave entrance. During the journey, I discovered that my left eye had indeed burned out. I refused to touch my face after that and learn the full extent of the burns. My forearms looked hideous enough.

The cave threatened to collapse each time a comet hit. Erasmo must have weakened it when he'd sent all the sand on me. Finally, however, I emerged into the moonlight. If it had been day, I knew I'd have been dead.

Unfortunately, this world's moon lacked the same recuperative powers of mine. Had there ever been a Moon Lady on this Earth? Still, there must have been something. I gained a perceptible amount of strength and greater clarity of thought.

I used a boulder and dragged myself to my feet. I felt like a reed in a storm, and I began to lurch, dragging my gamey leg, the one shot in the thigh by a crossbow bolt.

The climb upslope was an epic struggle. The salty desert with Erasmo's outline tracks caused me to sink to my knees. I shuffled forward like that, tried to climb to my feet and found myself sprawled on my belly. I crawled and comets blazed overhead. Hot air shrieked and made my burns relive their agony. It was then I realized this was Hell. Erasmo had lied. Lorelei had lied. Others Earths-they'd thought me a fool. Everyone has sought to use me. I roared curses. I raved and slammed my fists in the sand. The ground trembled, and it was only by degrees that I realized a comet had done that. As hot air shrieked its mockery, I fought to my feet. I swayed, and before I fell, I lurched in the direction of the tracks.

Time blurred and the comets seemed like demons howling at my stupidity. Somehow, I would get even.

I stopped and blinked gritty eyeballs. The tracks had disappeared. There was just shifting sand. It was time to hurl my coin as faraway as I could. Maybe my soul would find its way back. But for me-

A last rational part wondered if I'd passed the door. With agonizing slowness, I turned and shuffled back, following my tracks. I examined the ground like a lover memorizing a maiden's face. The ground trembled. I swayed, and then I saw it: a faint paw print.

Oh, you clever schemer. Erasmo must have removed the spell from his father's corpse.

I looked around, saw nothing new but refused to panic. I needed wits, strength and the luck of the damned, whatever that was. I pitched down my pouch of throwing stones. Then I shuffled around it in a widening circle. After the third circuit, I noticed a hump of sand. I thumped to my knees and dug, and I found Erasmo's father.

I waited until a comet blazed and I saw the haze of the door. I laughed. It was a crazed thing. Maybe Erasmo had set a trap in our Earth. Maybe he had locked the door. I crawled on my knees to the hazy image. What would happen if he'd locked it? Did it matter? I struggled to my feet, staggered and hurled myself through.

— 21-

There was an awful moment of stretching, as if a judge had chained my ankles and wrists to separate teams of horses, and the horses stained to tear me in two. I writhed in agony. Then my head struck wood. That deflected me. I struck something else, staggered and pitched onto my face in dreadful blackness.

I groaned. Erasmo had laid a trap. He was a sorcerer, a tricky card player. Here is the king of diamonds. Now it's the queen of hearts. Here is the door to Earth. Now it's the door to a dark prison. He had outthought me at every turn. He-

I heard something stir. With my charred fingers, I groped for my deathblade. It was almost pathetic how hard I clung to life. Was a beast in my cell here with me?

Hellish red light appeared. I snarled and tried to lift myself off the floor.

"Darkling!"

I blinked my good eye, confused. Images blurred before me.

"By the moon, you're burned."

Behind the hellish light, I spied elfin features. They eloquently spoke of horror and pity.

I tried to speak.

Lorelei knelt beside me, and her hand dipped toward my face, hesitated, dipped closer and then hovered. She clutched her shining ruby in her other hand.

"You're too big for me," she said. "You'll have to crawl."

A whispering laugh was all I could manage. I was too ghastly to touch. She was too dainty to dirty her fingers on the likes of me. I couldn't fathom her presence here.

I began to slither, using my burnt elbows to propel myself an inch at a time. The passage through the door had stolen most of my remaining strength. I despised my groans. I lost the ability to sense my surroundings. I crawled because it was my only meaning. I crawled because Erasmo had lured me to a swamp and there had stabbed me in the guts. He'd left me for dead and others had sought to use that. I crawled because instead of burning me, he had buried me because he had once seen tears in my eyes. Erasmo had beaten me too many times. If I stopped, he won everything.

But I didn't stop. I crawled past barrels in a cellar. I crawled up stairs, through corridors.

"That way, Gian," someone shouted. "No. Left, left, your other left."

I crawled blindly and spilled down steps, and I felt cooling rays

upon my face. I lay as one dead and soaked the rays. It gave me peace. It eased my hurts.

"Darkling, you must crawl back into the shop. If you draw upon too much of the Moon Lady's power at once, she'll be able to trap your will."

I struggled up, leaning against the Alchemist Shop. Moonbeams still bathed me. I had no idea how long I'd been lying here.

Lorelei crouched nearby, with concern upon her face. "You must heal by degrees," she said, "just like you did in the swamp."

I nodded, thinking I understood. So I arose stiffly, with pain, and shuffled back into the hated building.

***

Healing by degrees meant healing a little each night.

"I counsel you to wait until you have all your strength, all your abilities, before you meet Orlando Furioso again."

Lorelei and I sat in the dungeon of my former palace. Rusty chains adored the walls. A rat-nest was a rack's lone tenant. Lorelei told me she'd escaped out of the castle that grew after she'd learned the priestess of the Moon had departed. She'd then raced to Perugia.

"By my arts, I realized the Lord of the Night had departed this place," Lorelei said. "In his pain, Erasmo failed to cover his trail and I found the Alchemist Shop, the stairs, the cellar and the tunnel to the door. It's been difficult, but I've kept it open these past weeks on the assumption-on the hope-that you were too stubborn too die."

Apparently, I owed her my life.

One portion of the tale troubled me-this long passage of time. The evidence supported Lorelei, but it was still very strange. I'd entered the ruins of Perugia at the beginning of spring. Now it was summer. Yet I'd only been on the doomed Earth less than a day.

Lorelei tried to explain. "How long does a journey take moving from this Earth to the doomed one? By your reckoning, it was a moment of time. But the actual journey took much longer. There is also the possibility that time moves differently on that Earth than ours."

I shook my head.

"Maybe a minute there is half a day here," she said.

"That seems contrary to reason," I said.

"What it means," Lorelei said, with growing enthusiasm, "is that the Lord of Night has been gone for months. During those months, his grip upon his minions weakened."

"They must have believed he died," I said.

"Exactly," Lorelei said. "And that began a subtle positioning for power. It's as if the king had died and the sons began jockeying for nobles or hiring mercenaries. What it also meant was a weakening of

Erasmo's grip over his subjected cities. The priestess of the Moon discovered that, and she decided to strike. I think she believed you'd failed. She thus left to exhort the subjected princes to form a league and storm the Tower of the East."

"But Erasmo returned," I said.

"Badly wounded," Lorelei said.

"You say he's a powerful sorcerer. Can't he simply heal himself?"

"Ordinarily, that's true. But you wounded him with the deathblade."

A fierce grin stretched my lips. "The knife smokes when I cut people."

"The wounds smoke, not the knife."

I studied Lorelei, although with just one eye. The burns on my forearms and face had scabbed in a ghastly manner. When she spoke, Lorelei looked elsewhere. She presently played a card game called 'Solitaire.' Her dainty fingers flipped a card, a ten of spades.

"How is it that you know so much about Darklings?" I asked.

"If you live long enough, you hear just about everything." She laid down another card.

"Why can't Erasmo heal from my deathblade?"

"I didn't say he can't heal," Lorelei said. "But with your blade… it's harder to heal, even for a Lord of Night."

"What is the deathblade?"

Lorelei shook her head as if to say she didn't know.

I scratched at a rough edge on the table. Lorelei had been at the door between worlds to keep it open for me. She'd been at the castle when I'd decided to leave, playing cards in the warrens. She'd warned me about healing too fast lest the Moon Lady absorb my will. In my years as ruler of Perugia, I'd learned to suspect too many fortunate occurrences.

Lorelei was small, dainty, with elfin features and a quick smile. Her jester's attire seemed to fit her well. She tucked her hair under the belled cap and her chin came to a pretty point. Yet she was an Immortal. She had survived the ages and would therefore reasonably be tougher than her appearance would warrant. What schemes took place under her jester's cap? What occupied an Immortal's thoughts? What would an Immortal want?

I laid a half-healed hand over hers. She looked up, and I saw her battle the distastefulness of my touch.

"If you're not the Moon Lady," I said, "you're here to do her biding."

She tried to jerk her hand out from under mine. I gripped hers so she could not.

"You're wrong," she said, "although I'm pleased to see that you're

becoming suspicious. For someone like you, it's as needed as breathing."

I did not breathe. Did she insult me? "What is the deathblade?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"It's impolite for a gentleman to call a lady a liar. Yet what if the lady lies?"

"I'm here to help you," she said.

"Just how does one become an Immortal?"

"That's much too personal to explain."

I tightened my grip.

"You're hurting me," she said.

"It's an odd thing. But every sorcerer and sorceress I've met has tried to use me. Maybe Immortals possess greater cunning and let the pawn believe he makes his own choices. The thought…troubles me. Whether I'm the prince of Perugia or the Darkling, I refuse to be anyone's lackey. From the first, I've wanted answers. I still want them."

I let her go.

She stood so her chair scraped the floor and she turned away.

"Do you know what else is interesting?" I asked. "It concerns the priestess of the Moon. Is she a fool? Having met her, I doubt it. She must have known you helped me. How otherwise could I have found the secret corridors, never mind the Pool of Memories? In any Italian city, that would have been considered treason and the culprit would have hanged. Is the priestess too queasy to commit justified bloodshed? Is the woman who buys corpses afraid of dealing death? Now consider your punishment. She locked you in a room, allowed you to practice spells. I combine that with the realization that you know much about Darklings and even more about the Moon Lady. Do you know that Erasmo offered me life if I'd join him? He wanted knowledge concerning the Moon Lady. Now that I've had time to think, I wonder if the Moon Lady is secretive. She must be secretive if her very own priestess doesn't know about the hidden corridors in her castle."

"Knowledge is power," Lorelei said, with her back to me. "You seek to strip me of my accumulated wisdom."

"Madam is clever and seeks to change the topic. I've merely said that I refuse to be your dupe. Yet you're suggesting an interesting thing. Knowledge is power. The sword is power. The will to act is power."

"What if the sword is swung at the wrong person?" she asked.

"I see your point," I said. "But I still desire-"

"What do you offer me in return for this knowledge?"

I considered that. “What do you want?”

Lorelei turned around, although she wouldn’t look at my burns. Slowly, she sat at the table, on the edge of her chair.

“I want to know what happened on the doomed Earth.” There was eagerness in her voice. “Tell me every word the Lord of Night spoke there. Describe it all.”

“You seek to strip me of my unique knowledge.”

“Quid pro quo,” she said.

I wasn’t a lawyer, but I assumed she meant an equal trade.

So I told her what I remembered. She sat absorbed, this dainty Immortal, idly fingering her cards as I spoke. When I finished, she began to speak about the deathblade. It was a fantastic tale. The Moon Lady had once sought out a monstrous smith named Mulciber, and in the dawn of time, he’d forged a dagger with dreadful spells. The Moon Lady paid the price and from it conceived a misshapen brat. In later times, the brat designed the castle that grew. The deathblade had the power to give lycanthropes and other hard-to-kill creatures wounds. The blade’s bite corrupted the flesh of normal folk, its poisoned metal needing only the slightest touch to be lethal. Lycanthropes healed from other kinds of cuts, although silver blades could also mortally wound them.

“What are the lycanthropes?”

“Creatures from another place,” she said.

“A place like the dead Earth?”

“You’ve paid for *some* knowledge,” she said, “not *all* my accumulated wisdom.”

“What I would like to know is who you are and why you’re helping me.”

She became thoughtful until she dared peer into my good eye. It was artfully done. Then she concentrated upon her cards.

“I was born a mortal, just as you were. But that was in the days when the Old Ones walked in power, before the curse put them to sleep. I was born in the lands now called Greece, near Athens. It was a handful of stone dwellings then.” Lorelei shook her head. “It will be light soon and you’ll sink into deathlike oblivion. So I’ll shorten the tale to this. I sought out the Moon Lady and became one of her maenads. I remember your ancestor. He was a reckless man, handsome and bold. He, too, sought out the Moon Lady, and he won her love. He was also vain, and refused to pay the price for her embrace.”

Lorelei pursed her dainty lips. “There is a spider called the black widow. It kills her lover. The Moon Lady practiced a similar rite. The first Baglioni must have known about that. He was handsome and bold, and after his night with the Moon Lady, he sought out a maenad

and taught her forbidden delights. That was a terrible crime. For the maenads had to foreswear intimate relations with men in order to gain acceptance by the Moon Lady. This maenad fell from grace, knew the man and fled with him. He lived out his mortal span, and he received the Moon Lady's child, which he raised. As unbelievable as it sounds, the Moon Lady refrained from killing him. And she favored the Baglioni line ever since. I think…I think he wooed her beyond the believable. I think the Moon Lady loved him, although she loved herself and her ways more."

"You were that maenad," I said.

Lorelei laughed sadly and shook her head. "The maenad was my birth sister. The Moon Lady sent me to kill her, which I did. In those days, I ruthlessly sought power. No. I killed my sister, but that planted a seed that sprouted hundreds of years later. I rebelled only when it became safe to do so, after the Old Ones had entered their eon-long slumber."

Lorelei turned over a card, a nine of spades, and after a thoughtful pause, she placed it over the ten of spades.

"You're helping me in order to pay back an old debt to your sister?"

A flicker of what might have been pain appeared on her face. It vanished as she shook her head. "I'm not a fair maiden in one of your Italian poems," she said. "I'm an Immortal, which is to say, a survivor. You're suspicious of me because I happened to be in the castle when you wandered in the warrens. I was there partly because the Moon Lady's Darkling had taken too long in arriving. There were other reasons, but since those don't concern you, I'll keep them to myself. Why do I help you? The answer is simple. I fear Erasmo. He is a true acolyte of Old Father Night. That grim one loves death. Look at the destruction his servant plans. Although…I think Old Father Night may have miscalculated with your friend."

"Meaning what?" I asked.

"That I believe Erasmo plans to supplant the Old Ones. I think he strives for power over them. Others have tried that in the past, those with unbridled ambition and deep cunning. That's another reason I'm helping you. These upheavals are always dangerous to Immortals."

"That doesn't explain why you're trying to thwart the Moon Lady," I said.

"But it does. Erasmo and his master are worse. Yet she's bad enough, if given half a chance. If we're not careful, she'll supplant them once they're gone, and she'll raise a dark kingdom devoted to her worship. She might forgive my past rebellion, but she might not. I don't care to give her the chance to decide."

"Why would the moon priestess allow you in the castle then?"

“Are you sure you were a Perugian prince?” she asked. “You Italians are noted for your deceit and backstabbing, for making an alliance one day and selling out to someone stronger the next. The Moon Lady accepts my aid because she hates Old Father Night more than she hates me.”

With a fingernail, I pried at the rough table edge. “Then you seek to return our world to what it was before the plague.”

“No. That’s impossible, although it would be ideal. I think your Italian cities were about to enter a golden age, say, in another hundred years. All the elements were in place.” She shrugged. “As I’ve said before, I think some of the Old Ones may have become insane. The plague and now this trumpet…mass death unleashes terrible forces. The world is awash in sorcery as I suspect it might have been in the beginning. There is the possibility that this chaos might unravel everything.”

I thought about the dead world, the comets that blazed across the heavens and hit with shattering force. Erasmo took us on that road so he could forge…whatever his ambitions had conceived. He was like a man who whipped a team of horses, with his wagon careening along the edge of a cliff. He could plunge over the cliff at any moment, but he could also arrive at his destination. In this instance, his wagon was our world.

“Did you cause me to sleep longer in the swamp than the Moon Lady had planned?” I asked.

Lorelei laid down another card. “I wish I knew how to do that. It would take great cleverness.”

I noticed she didn’t say no or yes. But I left it at that, deciding she would lie about it if she had.

***

The nights passed and my hurts healed. The eye took the longest. Without Lorelei and in my impatience, I would have lain in the moon’s rays all night. I began to wonder if Lorelei told the truth about that. Maybe she wanted me to linger here for reasons of her own.

To test my suspicion, I remained under the moon longer that night, long enough that I felt the Moon Lady’s tug. I hurried indoors and refused to take out my coin, much as a siren urge tickled my curiosity.

Lorelei reappeared two nights later, the closest to angry I’d seen her.

“I doubted you,” I said. We were in the dungeon again, and it made me feel like a vampire.

Lorelei reflected on my words and her anger dwindled. “I fled because I’m unsure how much the Moon Lady can sense while communing with you. I certainly don’t want her to know I’m here. If

you do that again, I'll leave for good."

"Do you wish to come with me to the Tower of the East?"

She laughed. "Only a fool would join the Darkling on one of his quests. He has a way of surviving dangers, while those around him die hideously."

"You make 'Darkling' sound like a title."

"Yes," she said.

"Is Orlando Furioso truly the famous paladin from Charlemagne's court?"

"Do you doubt it?" she asked.

"Why are his eyes red?"

"Ask him next time you meet."

"Is he immortal?"

"He's extremely dangerous, if that's what you're asking." She completed her sets, gathered and slid the cards into a small box, which she secreted in a pouch. "I think Erasmo knows you're alive."

"How would he-"

"While you've healed, powerful sorcery has occurred. I have my ways of knowing, and no, I won't tell you them. Maybe as troubling as the sorcery, calls have gone out. Rumors tell of Anaximander marching for the Tower of the East."

"Who's that?" I asked.

"A particularly vile servant of Old Father Night," she said, "who is commonly associated with the Forgotten Ones. But on a more personal note for you, there is word Erasmo has raised Lord Cencio."

"Who?"

"You slew him, I believe."

"I'm not aware-"

"He was an altered man. He led the pack that hunted you."

"Signor Fangs for Teeth?" I asked.

Lorelei frowned.

"There was a noble who had wolf-like fangs," I said, "but otherwise seemed normal."

"Lord Cencio wore a hat with a crow's feather."

"That's him," I said. And it was my turn to frown. "What do you mean, Erasmo 'raised him'?"

"The term is sufficiently descriptive," she said. "It's a rare occurrence, because it's a difficult spell, but sometimes sorcerers who serve Old Father Night hold a grim threat over their minions. Namely, failure sometimes means returning as a dead-alive. Such creatures are driven with infernal desperation to perform their task. That being so, you should leave Perugia tomorrow."

"Are you suggesting I should have burned the man's body?"

"You couldn't have known this would happen," she said.

My left eye only saw things in a blur, although my Darkling strength had almost returned. I lacked my former speed, although Lorelei had assured me it too would return.

"You seem to be well informed," I said. "Is my wife alive?"

"I wish I knew."

"What about my children?"

Lorelei spread her hands, shrugged.

"Where would Erasmo keep them?"

"I can't say for certain," she said, with an evasive edge.

"Can't or won't?" I asked.

"A little suspicion is reasonable. But surely by now you should trust me."

"Knowledge is power," I said. "How can I know that anything you've told me is true?"

She stiffened. "Your bitterness is understandable, signor. But I think-"

My hands clenched. I wanted to throttle Erasmo, smash his head against paving. He had my wife! And for all I knew, Laura thought he was me.

"You must leave Perugia," Lorelei said softly.

I forced my hands open. "You suggested earlier that these sorcerers and Old Ones act like Italians. If I were to go to the priestess of the Moon, would she help me against Erasmo?"

Lorelei gave me a shrewd look. "The priestess is brave, if foolhardy. An army of desperate soldiers gathers on the edge of Venice's old swamp. It threatens Erasmo and surely diverts him to some degree. That helps you. You must beware of her, however. She is the Moon Lady's servant, although she holds some articles dear to Darklings of the past. You must do as you think best."

I touched my bad eye. Tomorrow night, I would begin.

— 22-

I stood on a crag of the northern slope of the Apennines Mountains. Pine trees spread out below me. Even farther north was the vast Po Valley.

I'd left the ruins of Perugia several nights ago. My left eye saw shapes now, but not the details. I could defeat any man I met, but wouldn't try a fifty-foot leap. In a few nights, perhaps I could.

The Po Valley was formerly a lush land, rich in crops, industrious peasants, shrewd merchants and cunning princes. Milan was its greatest city, although it had others almost as strong. Venice stood to the east, on the edge of the Adriatic Sea. North of the Po stood the mighty Alps. It separated the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of France from the Po Valley. The notable thing about the Holy Roman Empire was that it was neither holy nor Roman and could hardly be called an empire. Instead, it contained princedoms, dukedoms and city-states each filled with sauerkraut-gobbling Germans, who only stopped bickering long enough to resist their feeble emperor. The French on the other hand….

Englishmen with longbows and cunning tactics had repeatedly trampled the French in a series of off again, on again wars. The only sad aspect to that was that after thoroughly looting the French, many Englishmen had trekked over the Alps to enlist as mercenaries here. Ofelia for instance had hired a White Company captain and his ruffians to do her bidding.

I sighed. The plague must have changed some of what I'd known. The unleashed magic would have altered things even more. I marveled now that I hadn't asked Lorelei about it. Still, I knew the priestess had cajoled princes to raise an army against Erasmo. That surely meant dukes and barons of Milan, Savoy and other cities and surrounding regions.

I glanced at the moon and began the trek down from the Apennines. The scent of pine needles dominated and my boots often crunched upon them.

I knew too little of this Black Death world. The trouble was that most people locked their doors at twilight, barons raised their drawbridges and magistrates ordered town gates shut. Except in the larger cities, few people moved at night. There might be outlaws or daring knights who planned a dawn ambush, but those labored hard to remain hidden.

I'd tramped through forest and over hill in the sight of wolves, owls and bats, but no people. During the day, I hid in caves or in a deep forest or dug a hole and crouched in it.

The next night I left the foothills and strode through grasslands. I headed east as much as north. I avoided cultivated fields and walled hamlets and stuck to pasturelands, brush and forests.

I made an exception the next night. I headed through a park. I knew because foresters had obviously cleared brush from the birch and oaks to make it easier for when his lordship hunted. The sight gladdened me. It meant that despite the plague and despite evil sorcerers, there was still some normality in the world.

A breeze rustled leaves. The wind brought the odor of fire mingled with barbecued pork. Horrid shrieks salted the smells, and it reminded me that humans and swine often smelled the same when burned.

A half mile later, I exited the tree line. Nearby lay a village-sized heap of embers. It was either a colossus's campfire or the site of the atrocities that I'd sensed earlier. As I neared and felt the heat, my face tingled in remembrance of the living flame. I quashed any irrational fears-and the rational ones-and skulked nearer the burnt remains. I found mutilated peasants hung by their heels. I found fire-shriveled corpses nailed to burnt barns and I found headless, axe-hacked sheep.

A large man tied to a post still stirred. Unspeakable acts had been committed upon his person. He had glazed eyes and blood oozed down the bridge of his nose.

I crouched beside him. "Who did this do you?"

He moaned. I cut him loose and laid him on his back.

"Who did this?" I whispered. "Tell me, and I will avenge you."

His lips writhed.

I put my ear near his mouth. "The Devil's music," he whispered. Then he died.

When I'd been prince of Perugia, wars had been a regular occurrence. The usual strategy was to burn your enemy's fields and slaughter his peasants. Without crops and peasants to grow new ones, he would lack money or the means to feed his troops. The thoroughness of the gutted village and the sheep carcasses were an ordinary hazard of war. These atrocities meant it was something more.

A bloody footprint in the mud of a sheep-pen either implied the Devil or evilly altered men. The cloven-hoofed print was many times larger than what a ram could make.

I followed the sinister tracks to a rutted road. The dirt road revealed nothing because it was nearly as hard as brick. I looked all around, glanced at the stars and listened. The man had spoken about the Devil's music. I only heard the breeze. So I hurried north along the road.

On a weedy hill, I heard the piping for the first time. It was eerie and yet compelling. It disgusted me and it stirred lusty memories. I

left the road and hurried down the side of the hill, following the piping. I passed unkempt hedgerows and strode through oat fields thick with thistles. A fox yipped from the door of an abandoned hut. An owl winged overhead as it headed toward the piping.

Images of Laura and me entwined in love, of maidens I'd known in my youth filled my thoughts. Was a Darkling still a man in that sense?

I stumbled through an old grove, and I spied a bonfire ahead. It was then the Moon Lady whispered to me. I had run far tonight under her silvery influence. Her siren call dampened some of my lust. I stopped, shocked at myself. The piping remained, but I heard other sounds now. People shrieked. Others howled. There was a roaring sound of fire. The music had trapped me unawares.

I crept through the grove as the piping fed my lusts. I wanted Laura. I wanted any woman. The need was powerful, but I steeled myself and slunk to the edge of the grove. A mighty bonfire crackled below. Around it cavorted all manner of altered men and human hounds. The shrieks came from the center of the flames. People in a great wooden cage burned to death. They screamed, writhed and sobbed as smoke billowed from their flesh.

A huge creature stood upon a boulder with a flat top. He had hindquarters like a goat and goat-like legs and undoubtedly cloven hoofs. The upper half of his body was muscularly manlike and slicked with sweat. Goat horns sprouted from his forehead and he had a long, narrow beard like some obscene he-goat. Many of those cavorting around the fire were like him. The hounds that once were men barked joyfully. Naked women twirled around the fire with horror stamped upon their faces. The goat-men pawed and fondled them, and brayed laughter at their weeping.

One group, however, stood motionless. They were dead-faced soldiers. Among them sat a horseman with a wide-brimmed hat that sprouted a black crow's feather. He stared at the scene, occasionally snarling and reveling wolfish teeth.

The wretched spectacle revolted me. I understood then that the Old Ones were humanity's enemies. For I believed I viewed what it had been like in the dawn world. The old legends…they but hinted at the evils that had occurred when sorcery reined. Erasmo wished to return to that time for his own nefarious goals. What prompted these altered men to torture normal folk, to terrorize them so?

I was the Darkling. Maybe the magic worked upon me, had changed me, too. But I wouldn't war upon humanity. I'd champion it against these vile predators.

I took out my coin and held it between my thumb and index finger. I turned from the bonfire, raised my arm and held the coin in

front of the moon. The moon's rays seemed to penetrate the metal and give an appealing haze to the Moon Lady's portrait. She kept her mysterious smile, the beautiful profile. Then the coin became warm and dizziness threatened me. The smile shifted. Her portrait-she turned, facing me. She was even more beautiful than I'd realized.

"Moon Lady," I whispered.

"You must kneel." Her words were throaty like a cat's purr but with incredibly sensual overtones. She looked into my eyes. Hers were silver, without any pupils. Her dark hair was like a curly mane. She wore a low cut gown. I wanted to kiss her throat, her lips….

"You must obey me," she purred.

My arm felt heavy. I wanted to say yes. Then I heard a shout. It sounded as if from faraway.

"What is that?" she asked.

I remembered my plan and aimed her coin at the vileness below. I saw Lord Cencio, Signor Fangs for Teeth, urge his horse through the throng. He shouted at the Goat Man piping from upon the boulder.

I palmed the coin and looked down. Our eyes met.

"I ask that you restore me, my lady. Heal my eye. Give me my former speed."

"I will," she purred. "First bend the knee and vow me your soul."

Part of me longed to do just that. But I whispered, "I am Gian Baglioni."

She pouted, and she did it in a way that made me desire her above all things.

"The minions of Old Father Night will soon hunt me, my lady. Will you sacrifice me so easily? Or will you heal me and await the day I proclaim you as my goddess?"

"You cannot use me, my Darkling. Kneel. Obey and vow me your soul."

I tore my gaze from hers and looked down. From upon his horse, Lord Cencio sat at the foot of the boulder. He shouted, and now the Goat Man listened.

The eerie piping stopped. The naked women collapsed as sweat poured from them. The lesser goat-men, the hounds and others looked to the boulder.

"The Darkling is near!" Lord Cencio shouted. "I feel him. We must stop this foolishness and hunt."

"Do you hear?" I asked the Moon Lady.

She stared at me from out of the coin, and she shook her head.

With an effort of will, I folded my fingers over the coin, and I broke the contact.

"Which way?" the Goat Man asked.

Lord Cencio gazed into the darkness. He lacked a smile, and his

eyes burned with insatiable hatred. “We must hunt,” he said.

It made me wonder if he’d lost some of his former power. As a dead man, maybe he was less than before.

The Goat Man rose to his imposing height. He bleated, “We seek the Darkling. So let us hunt.”

I pocketed the coin and slipped away. It had been worth the attempt. It had-

My nostrils flared. My left eye…I closed my right eye, but I still saw the grove in detail, a leaf at my boot. I felt greater strength and knew I had my former speed. I grinned, and I fled into the darkness. Erasmo’s minions thought they hunted me. But now I hunted them.

***

I reached the rutted road at the top of the weedy hill and ran down the other side. In the distance behind, I heard the bleat of angry goats.

My strategy was simple: separate the horde of altered men and kill them one at a time. I no longer heard the howl of hounds or Lord Cencio’s horn.

I crouched behind bushes and waited. I might have miscalculated. The moon sank into the horizon. I would soon have to look for a place to hide. There was less than an hour until-

A bleat alerted me. I eased back a branch. Goat-men filed from behind a dirt hill. I counted nine of them. They bore axes and ropes. They were naked, although their hindquarters were hairy. Each had an outrageously sized member.

I debated ambushing them here. I would keep one alive and question him. Yet I feared that others were near. The country was too open. I tried to see if any of them had a horn. Two carried heavy sacks. They spoke in voices too low for me to catch their words.

I eased away. It was too near dawn. I should have paid closer attention to that. I slunk away and then ran. I fairly flew across the ground. Then I stumbled upon a pond and a stratagem blossomed. I did not need to breathe; they did. I waded into the pond. Muck sucked at my boots. I obliterated most of the tracks and waded toward the middle. The water rose to my waist, chest and then over my head. A catfish nosed near to investigate. I poked him. He fled in a flash of fins.

It was a good-sized pond, once likely kept for fish, ducks and cattle. The plague must have murdered the owners. The surface loomed thirty feet above my head. I crouched low and waited. I was sure the goat-men fled daylight like me and would correspondently feel compelled to catch me while it was still night.

Soon the water stirred. I squinted and thought to spy hoofs at the edge of the pond. I waited at the bottom, with a tight grin. Goat-men

peered into the murky gloom. Then splashes heralded their entry. Several floundered toward me. Kicking hoofed feet little helped. They used their arms and hands.

I sprang, grabbed a sinewy arm and plunged my blade into his chest. His mouth opened and bubbles billowed upward. Four died deep in the pond. I waded up, slew two more in the shallows and chased down the seventh. The last two bleated horror and dashed faster than I could believe possible.

Dawn was minutes away. I hurried back for the pond and splashed past half-sunken corpses. Then the glimmer of sunlight made the water gleam and harsh rays slanted down like spears. I tried to remain alert as I weighted the dead with stones. The sun remorselessly gained ascendance, however, and I slumped and lost awareness.

***

The following night, I arose like a wary sea serpent and found bloody, trampled reeds.

I faded into rugged terrain. Rabbits, squirrels, even a fox, leaped in surprise as I squelched by in my waterlogged boots. Half the night passed. My garments dried out. I heard shouts then, the clangor of battle and mad piping. A horse neighed.

I broke into a sprint.

It was a hilly area, with low bushes and clumps of trees. I'd used the local road, a rutted track as before. I ran along it so my cloak flapped.

The piping was different. Last night thoughts of lust had nearly consumed me. Now fear mingled with bloodlust. Creatures bleated rage and I heard war cries and men's shouts. The intensity of sword-strokes, of clashing steel, increased. Wood thumped, which likely meant shields absorbed otherwise debilitating cuts. I rounded a bend and jumped over a boulder. Bright light illuminated the darkness. Glass shattered. Men shouted urgent commands. The piping became crazed.

I slid behind a bush and peered at a desperate fight. Mailed men-at-arms stood in a knot, many back-to-back. They held dented shields and notched swords. Those in the middle raised torches and lanterns. One soldier wound a crossbow. Fear contorted every one of their faces. Around them in a swarming circle, savage goat-men clutched double-bladed axes. They darted in, swung and then nimbly jumped back. Beyond them strutted the muscular Goat Man. He blew his pipes and sweat slicked his hair. He had a vile grin and his eyes swirled with power.

It was a chaotic fight, and chunk by chunk, the goat-men hewed apart the terrified soldiers' shields.

A campfire and cloaks on the ground told the story. The goat-men

must have surprised the soldiers-mercenaries, I decided. Ah! Their armor gleamed. These were White Company soldiers, Englishmen.

The crossbowman slapped a bolt into his weapon, raised it and fired. The huge Goat Man ducked the bolt, and his thick fingers moved upon his vile pipes. Three goat-men leaped at the crossbowman. Men-at-arms converged. One hacked and cut a goat-man. A different goat-man loped off the man's sword-hand. Then the three altered men jumped out of range of enemy weapons. The crossbowman, meanwhile, hurriedly rewound his weapon.

Four goat-men lay dead or dying in the glade. Three of them wore bolts in their bloody chests. Twice that many mercenaries were dead or clutched at their wounds. The mayhem of shouts, screams and savage bleats, the clash of steel, the thump of wood, the battle was brutal. The goat-men had the numbers and greater fury. The White Company mercenaries had armor and training, but the evil music meant their doom.

I had vowed to champion humanity, and I wanted to whittle down the odds. The Goat Man switched to a screeching tune. It must have been a signal. By now, some of the human shields were mere shards of wood. The mercenaries looked haggard. The mark of death was on their faces.

The Goat Man lifted his horned head star-ward and seemed to play his tunes to them. The lesser goat-men tensed, ready to spring upon the mercenaries. This time, I did not think the altered men would leap back, but rush in like wolves for the final kill.

I drew my deathblade. I rose up and charged the muscular Goat Man.

— 23-

Battle is a strange beast. It is a thing of muscle, sinew, nerves and courage. The greatest element of a fight is winning.

It is also important to remember that a primordial monster lives in most men. To hack, hurt your foe and remain sound is one of the headiest feelings possible. Men do not fight to test themselves, although a soldier is tested. Men do not normally fight in a hopeless battle, although many are caught in hopeless situations. The soldier fights to see his foe turn tail and run. Then a savage animal is born as the howling bloodlust takes over. The terror of steel swung in your face, the grim thought of watching your arm loped off, turns into blazing relief when your foe runs away. That relief is transformed into rage at him who just threatened you. The rage becomes joy unspeakable. The physical need to hack your sword into his back, to watch him topple, it is a bestial thing and makes for murderous victories.

It also means that in fights between groups the rear is always the most vulnerable spot. A group of soldiers cannot march on a foe if his backside is exposed to enemy attack. The soldier must turn and protect himself. It is a basic instinct. That is why the mercenaries had clumped into a group, gone back to back.

I shouted at the goat-men. I charged out of the dark. I raced at their backs. That stole much of their forward momentum against the mercenaries. That stoppage caused others on the far side of the doomed circle to hesitate.

The second most vulnerable spot against a group of soldiers is their mind. Anything that surprises can cause confusion, hesitation and then panic.

I bellowed the Perugian war cry. Several goat-men saw me at once. They saw me race down the slope. I saw their gaze dart past me. For the obvious conclusion, for them, was that a lone man does not charge a soon-to-be victorious company of altered creatures. That would be insanely unmilitary. Seeing me, they expected others. Their question would be ‘how many others rushed them?’

Even though the Goat Man played his maddening pipes, his charges looked longer than they should have.

I hurled a rock with my left hand. The Goat Man nimbly ducked it. He was amazingly quick. He aimed his pipes at me and blasted a sickening tune.

Fear shivered through me like a spear in the guts, maddening panic. However, the purpose of a knight’s long training was to gird his soul with relentless courage. As Roger of Hoveden had once written:

‘He who has seen his blood flowing, who has felt his teeth cracking under an opponent’s blow, who has lain on the ground with his enemy over him, and still has not lost his courage, he who has been thrown to the ground time after time, only the more staunchly to stand up again-he may go into battle with high hopes. For virtue grows when it is irritated, but a soul that gives in to fear has only fleeting glory.’

My years of training as squire and knight now clamped down upon this wretched fear. And maybe being the Darkling gave me added courage. I flashed my deathblade, snarled and advanced at a trot.

The huge Goat Man lowered his pipes in astonishment. It was then I noticed a strong, musky odor. He reeked of it.

“Look at me, mortal,” he said. “Gaze into my eyes.”

I looked. His eyes seemed like pinwheels, swirling numbness into my mind. I shook my head, and my left hand touched my belt where my coin lay hidden. Greater fear entered me. This was no mere altered man. The Goat Man seemed ancient. Pan, I realized, or the Old One from eons past. He was the one men poorly remembered, making fanciful legends of Pan that were much too lighthearted.

“*Are* you a mortal man?” he bleated.

His goat-men held back, confused. The mercenaries waited, exhausted, watching us. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the crossbowman fit a bolt into his weapon.

The Goat Man’s eyebrows rose toward the two obscene horns that sprouted from his forehead. “You serve the Moon Bitch,” he said. “You’re the one the Lord of Night wants?”

“Are you his servant?” I sneered.

“You shall linger long and painfully for that remark.”

“Mulciber forged this,” I said, showing him the deathblade. “You’d do well to fear it.”

I think I saw fear in his strange eyes. I also heard a crossbow release. The Goat Man turned, but too late-or maybe just in time. The stubby iron bolt pierced his forehead to become a third and feathered horn. It staggered him, and the herd of goat-men groaned in dismay.

The leader did not collapse, however. He gave a fierce cry, and he leaped at me. He was fast, and he lowered his head like a charging beast. He tried to rake me with his horns. I twisted and slashed. I heard a horrified bleat and felt my blade cut skin. Then the Goat Man was past me. He moved in great bounding leaps, full of vigorous life. He fled. If the bolt had entered his brain, it lacked killing power. Or maybe Old Ones were dreadfully hard to kill.

The remaining goat-men cried out in misery. They lost their courage and glanced about like frightened animals.

The White Company mercenaries surely sensed this. They were

among the fiercest killers known. Their captain, a big man with a snarled red beard, bellowed a war cry, and he led the charge. Despite their nearly useless shields, notched swords and battered armor, the mercenaries began to slaughter the goat-men, who finally broke and ran pell-mell.

I decided to kill more of them before their leader recovered and re-gathered his herd. So I followed the altered men into the darkness, stabbing as I ran.

***

An hour later, I retuned to the mercenary camp. Men shouted. Lanterns lifted, and the crossbowman raised his weapon.

"I'm a friend!" I said.

They crouched tensely around campfires. The toughest arose with spear or sword. Many lay on bloody cloaks, some dead, some coughing out their last. Only a handful appeared to be in any condition to fight. One of those was a big man about my size. He had a red beard and wore iron gauntlets. I recognized him as the captain Ofelia had once hired. His leveled sword gleamed, which meant he must have already wiped it down and filed out the worst nicks.

"It's him," the big man said. "Lower your crossbow."

I strode out of the darkness. I'm not sure what they saw. They gave me wary looks. As the lanterns and firelight washed over me, many glanced at each other. Faces tightened. Some looked frightened.

"That was a brave stand," I said. My voice made some mercenaries flinch.

The leader peered at me closely. He bit his lip. Then he made a show of sheathing his sword. He strode out and held out his hand.

"I'm Carlo da Canale of Pisa, signor." His English accent was thick.

I nodded, and decided it would be unwise to tell him my real name.

"I'm Paolo Orsini," I said. He had been my marshal, my second in command while I was prince of Perugia.

Da Canale cocked an eyebrow. "You look familiar to me, signor. Have we met before?"

"It's possible," I said, "although I think I would remember a fighting man like you."

Da Canale grinned within his bushy beard. "Make way," he said. "Give our savior room."

Men scooted aside. I sat on a log and rubbed my hands over the flames as if for warmth.

"We have water, signor," Da Canale said.

I glanced at a nearby bowl, towel and bar of soap. "Thank you," I said. I scrubbed my face, hands and washed my hair. The

crossbowman handed me a comb.

"It's a gift," he said.

"Thank you," I said, and I ran it through my hair.

"You're human after all," Da Canale told me.

Several men-at-arms laughed uneasily.

I told them a tale, how the goat-men had hunted me, how I'd hidden in ditches and lain among corpses to fool them.

"They're clever," Da Canale admitted. "The Lord of Night has unleashed them like a new plague."

I nodded sagely.

Da Canale rubbed his leathery face, and he glanced at me with calculation. "I've never seen a man fight like you, signor. By the Dark One's beard, you don't even wear a sword. You charged the demon lord with a knife! He was fast, but you moved with a leopard's quickness. I saw one once when we raided North Africa. The Moors kept the leopard in a pit, and tossed down dogs to fight it. I sailed with the Genoese in those days." Da Canale appraised me. "Are you sure you're human, signor?"

"Don't you smell the brimstone?" I asked.

His eyes narrowed, but he laughed.

A man placed a jug of wine beside me and a hunk of moldy cheese. I sipped the wine, and wanted to spit it out. I didn't even try the cheese.

"Why did the goat-men attack you?" I asked.

"That is their task," Da Canale said.

"They make war on humanity?"

Men muttered at that.

Da Canale drew his sword, set it on his knees and picked up an oily rag. He began to rub the fine steel, and I felt he watched me closely.

"That was an odd question, signor," he said.

"You've spoken about my unusual speed," I said. "There is a reason for it, but I'm uncertain you will understand."

"These are strange times."

"And I've been through stranger," I said. "The Lord of Night has seen to that. He sent me to a strange realm."

"Sorcery," Da Canale whispered, and he made a warding sign. His men shifted nervously.

"In this strange place I learned to knife-fight in a new manner," I said. "Only lately have I returned. Now I find goat-men and other strange abortions loose in the land. Cities I knew lie in ruins. There has been mass dying."

"It is called the Great Mortality," Da Canale said. "Where exactly did he send you? How did you return?"

“That is unimportant. What is important is that I owe the Lord of Night a debt and I am determined to repay it.”

“Vengeance can be costly, signor, especially when your foe is such a powerful sorcerer.”

“I’ve honed my fighting skills for a reason,” I said.

“Join us!” the crossbowman cried. “We can use a fighter like you.”

Men-at-arms glanced at him in horror.

“You march to a fight?” I asked Da Canale.

He took his time answering. “I’ll tell you frankly, signor. You frighten me. Even a deadly fighter should not run out of the darkness to battle a demon. I’ve never seen anyone so quick except for creatures summoned by a sorcerer. It causes me to wonder if you’re fully human.”

He had touched upon that once too often. Before I thought of a suitable reply, he dug in his belt pouch and extracted several coins. He studied them, placed one on his knee and put the others back. He picked up the coin, looked at it, at me, and back again at the coin.

He pitched the coin to the crossbowman, who neatly caught it. “Is there a likeness?” Da Canale asked.

The crossbowman frowned and glanced at the coin, then at me. “What does this mean, signor?” the crossbowman asked his captain.

“Give him the coin,” Da Canale said.

I warily accepted it, and was shocked to see my likeness stamped there.

“It’s you,” Da Canale said, “is it not?”

Erasmo, I realized. He had stamped coins in his image-my image. What was wrong with him that he couldn’t accept the features he’d been born with? Surely he had become powerful enough to drop the pretence.

“I knew you looked familiar,” Da Canale said.

He held his sword and he darted a meaningful glance at the crossbowman. The man picked up his loaded weapon. Others stood. Steel scraped out of wooden scabbards.

I handed Da Canale the coin. “The sorcerer changed my features so I’d look like him. Why he did this, I cannot fathom, unless he thought it a joke.”

Da Canale became thoughtful. “We all might have died except for you. I owe you that, and I pay my debts.”

I felt an easing of tension.

“I wonder if you would grant me a favor,” Da Canale said.

I waited.

“You wear mysteries like a cloak, signor, but I would appreciate it if you could tell me why you helped us.”

He did not add, 'Tell us truthfully.' Yet I heard the plea in his question. I stared at the flames. These were hard times for men. These here struggled manfully, and they faced devils in the night. It was good to be among brave soldiers. I wondered if I had become one of the things of the night. The answer was so obvious it pained me.

"I believed that if I helped you," I said, "you would willingly answer certain questions of mine."

He nodded. "There is reason in that. Please. Ask."

"Why do you think the goat-men attacked you? So far, I've only seen them attack peasants."

"Men say the Lord of Night is hurt," Da Canale said. "Rumor speaks of him lying abed in the Tower of the East. From peasant, to knight, to lord, everyone fears him. Yet I'm sure you know this. Now, however, the lords of Milan, Pavia, Bologna and Modena have plucked up their courage. These lords have cast silver into the wind to hire companies, lances and even scattered men-at-arms, anyone who dares face this sorcerer. Signor Hawkwood of the White Company leads the army. The armed camp grows on the shore of an evil swamp, the first rampart to the Tower of the East. The Lord of Night may be hurt, but he sows fear and death through his minions. They butcher villagers, burn hamlets and attack small companies such as ours."

"How long have these brave lords cast their silver into the wind?" I asked.

"It is several weeks now."

"Will this host besiege the Tower of the East?"

"I'm not yet privy to their counsels," he said.

"It is a dangerous undertaking."

Da Canale's nostrils flared. "If you're asking why do I join? The answer is simple. I'm Hawkwood's man. And I've seen too much evil lately. Things like the Great Mortality, evil castles and goat-men are abominations. I will fight to stamp them out-given that I have a fighting chance."

"Thank you for your hospitality, Signor da Canale," I said, standing.

"You won't stay?"

I noticed he didn't ask me to stay. "I wish you luck, all of you." I bowed and then strode from the fire. Once hidden by darkness, I resumed my lonely trek to the Tower of the East.

— 24-

Signor Fangs for Teeth and his dead-faced men reappeared two nights later.

It was a mistake on their part. Or maybe it was fear. Erasmo wanted to harass me no matter the cost to him in lost minions. How difficult was it altering men, giving them supernatural powers? Maybe what Erasmo needed was time and he was willing to expend underlings to buy it.

I, on the other hand, wanted information. So I broke branches, stomped my booted foot in soft soil and slowed my remorseless trek to the Tower of the East. Finally, in the middle of a forest, I climbed a large cypress tree and waited in the mid-level branches.

Horsemen soon approached. I waited patiently, a human leopard ready to drop upon its prey. Signor Fangs for Teeth did not disappoint. His dead-faced men surrounded the tree. I recognized him by the floppy hat. The crow's feather looked frazzled. He clopped near and peered up.

I was already dropping and had timed it perfectly. His eyes widened and my boots collided with his shoulders. The horse staggered, almost went down and then ran into a tree. It wobbled like a drunk before it collapsed.

The dead-faced men sat like statues throughout. Their bared swords never wavered.

I concluded they were an extension of Lord Cencio's will. He lay on the ground, my knee on his chest and the tip of the deathblade at his throat. I wrenched the golden chain from him, twirled it twice and flung the medallion far away. I wished for a private conversation.

"No smiles, my lord?" I asked.

His black eyes burned with hatred.

"You seek death, I'm told."

"Your death," he said.

The wolf-like teeth were obscene. I wondered which was worse, a minor alteration or something like goat-men?

"My death," I said, "by which you gain restful oblivion for yourself."

Several of the dead-faced men swiveled their heads so they watched me with cold eyes.

"That is a poor choice," I said. "Here I offer you oblivion, and you try to be sly. No, Lord Cencio, you should consider my offer."

"The Lord of Night will simply reanimate me," he said.

"Even if you're chopped into small pieces, each burned into greasy ash?"

His dark eyes lost some of their intensity.

"I will vow to do this," I said.

The dead-faced men sheathed their swords. Signor Fangs for Teeth arched his neck. "I'm ready," he said.

"Ah, signor, first you must earn it."

Hatred tightened his face.

"Tell me something of interest," I said.

"…Of what nature?"

"Where are my wife and children?"

He frowned, and I think I understood why.

Even though I hated to say it, I asked, "Where are Erasmo's wife and children?"

He blinked several times. "It is odd you should ask that, signor. His daughter returns from aboard. She lands at Cape Lodovico in several nights."

"How do you know?"

"I overhead him tell the satyr."

"Why would Erasmo tell him?" I asked.

"We were to keep you from heading that way."

"And now you tell me this?"

He bared his hideous teeth. "Look at me, signor. I did not bargain to become one of the living dead, urged to hunt with infernal hate. I have accepted your offer and now demand that you keep your vow. Slay me, and burn this body. Do it. Or my soldiers will slay you instead."

Swords slid from scabbards.

I pressed my full weight onto his chest. I grabbed a handful of hair, stretched his neck and cut with furious strength.

The soldiers collapsed as before. I took one of their swords and used it for the grisly task. The pieces I faithfully burned in a fire. They smoked with a foul stench. Before I finished, the once dead-faced soldiers stirred. There was fearful animation in their faces now, terror. Whatever spell had held them in thrall was broken. Most slunk away, several ran. One picked up his sword and charged. He died swiftly. I concluded that each had made bargains with the darkness, and had become ensnared. Maybe for them this was a second chance.

All I knew was that Francesca, my daughter, came by galley from wherever Erasmo had sent her. Why did he want her now at the Tower of the East?

I wiped my hands on the leathers of the slain soldier. Then I strode into the night, headed for Cape Lodovico.

***

Two nights later, I reached the coast as the moon wobbled past stars and as surf crashed against rocks.

I climbed slippery boulders. I crunched across sand. Crabs feasted on a washed-up dolphin. Cape Lodovico was an unhealthy place, and I wondered who would be foolish enough to sail so close to shore in the dark? The answer soon revealed itself. A galley swayed a quarter mile from shore. The captain had thrown out anchors. Lanterns burned fore and aft, and I saw movement on the decks.

Galleys were finicky vessels, low in the water and narrow. Rough seas demolished them or such seas made life miserable for those aboard. The galley's purpose was speed. That speed was gained through oars. Masses of poor men supplied the muscle. In Genoa, a seaman with rations was paid 18 *soldi* a month or 30 *soldi* without rations.

Every time the wind blew toward shore, I smelled the stench of packed humanity. Normal galley practice called for pulling ashore each night. The men stretched their legs. Cooks built fires for hot food. Rowers and sailors dug holes instead of defecating over the rail.

Once, Venice had been queen of the waves. Her trade ships had gone everywhere in the Mediterranean. I still found it incredible that the plague had slain the city. Had Erasmo built his tower there out of arrogance? Perhaps there was a strategic reason. Maybe he allowed trade ships at the tower. Maybe he used it as a port. Maybe instead of an army, Da Canale's lords should have built a fleet.

Rocks rose here like fangs. Sea spray drifted inland with each crashing wave. Recalling the pond, I considered wading into the sea and to the anchor. I would shimmy up the rope, onto the galley and find my daughter. I discarded the idea because I realized it would be too dark underwater for me to find the anchor.

I studied my surroundings and noticed caves. The shore over there was a thin ribbon of sand and then jagged cliffs. The caves struck me as ominous. Or was I simply being superstitious?

Why would they land my daughter here instead of heading straight for Venice-the Tower of the East? Had Signor Fangs for Teeth lied?

Maybe a half-hour later I heard the clink of chains and spied movement in the largest cave. I ducked behind a boulder to watch.

Shambling…men emerged, men and women. They wore tatters for clothes or went stark naked. Each wore an iron collar, with a heavy chain that linked one to another. Several recoiled as they stepped into the moonlight, and they made keening sounds and whimpered with utter dejection. Behind them strode a huge man, nearly a giant. He wore rough leathers and boots and held a whip. He cracked it. The whimpering stopped on the instant, and they cringed in abject terror.

The near giant had long hair and cruel scars along his cheeks. The

face was wide, almost square and the nose mashed.

I recalled dark tales of the chained dead. Did those wretches belong to the Forgotten Ones? Lorelei had spoken about someone called Anaximander who marched to Erasmo's aid. Is that why the galley had anchored here?

Two big men in crude leathers appeared. One held a lantern. He waved it back and forth.

I glanced at the galley. A lantern waved there. Soon, a rowboat splashed in the sea. It was a *vacchette* or a "little cow," with eight oars. Men slipped over the galley-side and into the vacchette. They picked up oars as a sailor shoved off.

The chained wretches in the cave began to shriek. Whips cracked and the leather-clad men shouted harsh commands. Those in the chain-gang began a grotesque jig.

"Faster you scum!" a whip-master roared.

Another of the leather-clad men rushed forward with a white-hot brand. He burned one of the wretches, melted flesh. The prisoners danced with greater zeal and their chains clinked more often. Whenever I spied a face, whenever he or she entered the moonlight, their twisted features and haunted eyes told the story.

Had Erasmo forced my daughter to witness such horrors? A grimmer thought speared me. Had Erasmo sent my daughter to the Forgotten Ones and only now, he sent for her? A fierce rage took hold of me.

The big men in their crude leathers roared with mirth. They slashed their whips and bellowed lewd curses. One shoved a package at the near giant. Unlike the others, he wore a cloak. He handed over his whip and accepted a club. The one who might be Anaximander hooked the knotty club to his belt. As the wretches danced, he took his leave and began to work down the cliff.

To my relief, no one joined him, no terrified girl. But I had become too enraged to easily become calm again. Where was Francesca?

The vacchette could have moved faster. Several times, the rowers stopped. I imagine the awful noises from the cave terrified them.

Whips cracked from the cave. The leather-clad men roared, and they drove the chained wretches into the darkness. I didn't want to think about how deep the cave went or where it might lead.

The thump of oars soon grew louder. The man in the prow held up a lantern. He wore a black corselet and helmet. He had a narrow, evil face and reminded me of a snake. There was something odd about his hands.

If Francesca wasn't in the caves, she must be on the galley. I needed the vacchette in that case. So I slipped past the waves and

waded until I sank out of sight. Then I curved back toward where the vacchette headed. Fortunately, it was a cloudless night with a bright moon, and the splash of oars guided me. I pushed against the water and grabbed at wavy kelp. I hurried to get to the right spot. The bottom of the vacchette neared-I jumped and caught an oar. From above there came a muffled shout. I dragged myself up.

As I surfaced, sailors stared in horror. There were ten of them in the vacchette, eight rowers, a helmsman and a steersman. The helmsman held the lantern-and I saw his hands. It was the tip of a tentacle curled around the handle. The nearest rowers had hard faces and rubbery tentacles instead of arms. It was a sick marriage of octopus and human. More altered men!

With a heave of strength, I dragged along the oar and latched my hands onto the gunwale.

"What are you?" the helmsman bellowed, as if he should ask?

"Gig it!" screamed a sailor. "Gig it! It's trying to get aboard!"

I heaved up into them. The top of my head smashed against an octo-man's chin. He slumped. The hook of a gaff thudded into my back, with two tentacles twisted around its handle. I lashed out. The hook tore out of my flesh. That was raw agony. Then my knife was in my hands. I slashed. Octo-men screamed. The hook came down again and I twisted. It thudded into wood. That was their last chance. I had my feet under me now. I stabbed with brutal precision, fast. The rocking vacchette was too sluggish to affect my balance. One by one, they toppled overboard and sank under the waves. Apparently, their tentacles didn't supply them with greater ability in the waters.

I tested my shoulder, the one where the gaff had hooked me. It hurt to move, but now I owned the vacchette. Unfortunately, the waves slued the boat so it went sideways toward shore. The leather-clad man stood there. He held his club two-handed, and he craned his head as if to see what happened here in the vacchette. It told me he couldn't see in the dark as well as me.

Since I couldn't control the vacchette single-handed, not until I had time to study it, I slipped over the gunwale farthest from him and rolled into the sea. The salt water stung my wound.

I wondered briefly if the moon's constant healing was making me clumsy. The cuts and bruises hurt as much as ever. But a man's reactions were different when he knew everything could be healed.

I eased my eyes above water. The large, leather-clad man shouted at the vacchette. Was he blind to some of the octo-men floating nearby?

I rose slowly. Waves rolled against my back and pushed me. The near giant-my head almost reached the height of his shoulders-shouted louder. The vacchette scraped against sand, and the sea

turned it over.

Now shouts floated from the galley. Lanterns appeared, but it was too far for them to see at night. Did they have another vacchette? I froze then, for I spied a girl on the galley deck. She was half the size of the altered man beside her. That made her much taller than I remembered. Just how long had I slept in the swamp?

From higher on shore, the near giant raised his club. “Who are you?” he shouted.

I waded out of the water with the moon at my back. I waded with a feeling of floating, with exquisite rage roaring in my ears.

Underneath his leathers, he appeared to have lumpy muscles. He appeared to be strong, likely inhumanly so.

“You!” he shouted. “Are you from the boat?”

“I am,” I said, and my voice sounded strange.

He cocked his head. The package was between his booted feet. “Why did the vacchette tip over?” he shouted. “I thought I heard fighting.”

“Did the screaming give it away?”

“Mock me at your peril, O man. I am Anaximander. And I come from the Forgotten Ones.”

“Does that make you an Old One?”

He stepped toward me, squinting. Then he jerked back. “Bodies float in the water. What happened, man? Why did you fight among yourselves?”

There were more shouts from the galley. Sailors heaved in time to a sea-chantey as they pulled up the anchors. Others lit lanterns and hung them on the sides. It seemed as if the captain had decided to bring the galley closer to shore. He must not have owned a second vacchette. The little girl had disappeared or someone had taken her away.

Anaximander took a wide stance and gripped his club with both hands.

“You never did tell if you’re an Old One or not,” I said, drawing my knife.

His face tightened. “You’re the Darkling,” he whispered.

My cloak flapped as I leaped. He swung. It was powerful. I heard it swish. But in relation to me, the club was ponderously slow. I cut, and the blade barely scratched his skin. I almost stopped in shock. The club swung back. I barely jumped away in time.

“What are you?” I asked.

“Elated that I can gain my reward so soon,” he said with a laugh. “Why do you think the Lord of Night begged for my aid? Mortals fear your blade, but not me.”

I darted in again like a wolf. This time I hacked at his arm. It was

like hacking at a tree. He used his knees like battering rams. He swung his club in short, chopping arcs. I ducked, sidestepped and hacked three more times. This could go on all night.

"One of these times my club will connect," he panted.

"Why is my daughter on the galley?"

"Others fear your deathblade. But long ago, Old Father Night dipped me six times in the River Styx. I have the skin of a pine and the strength of a behemoth. Come, little man, end this charade, or I shall only knock you senseless and then drag you down to the Forgotten Ones."

He charged. I darted out of the way and chopped as hard as I could. Black stuff oozed from him, although it quickly hardened.

Octo-men bellowed from the approaching galley. Giant oars dipped in time to a booming kettledrum, and like a ginger beast, the galley creaked closer. Tentacle-limbed crossbowmen wound their weapons. A slotted lantern swept the shore with light.

I sheathed my knife and lifted a heavy rock. Anaximander charged with his club held high. He may have been strong and his skin was tree tough, but he was slow and fought clumsily. I heaved. The rock smashed against his chest. He toppled back and hit the sand with a thud. I sprang like a leopard, rolled him onto his belly and grabbed a fistful of hair. I yanked back hard, arched his neck. Then I hacked at his neck, once, twice, thrice.

Anaximander roared and put his hands on the sand. He heaved up. I hacked three more times. Black fluid gushed from his neck. I made ready to saw off his head.

Crossbows twanged. Several stubby bolts hissed past me and kicked up sand. Two smashed into my back and almost hurled me off Anaximander. One bounced off him. I hacked at the remaining shreds of flesh and parted Anaximander's head from his torso.

Black stuff oozed from the stump of his neck, but his body refused to wilt. It still pushed up, twisted and the wide hands grabbed for me.

I darted aside, astonished and sickened.

"Oh, that was foully done," the detached head said as it lay on its side.

The lumpy muscled body lumbered to the head. It reached down and grasped the long hair. It lifted the head, swiveled around and aimed the face at me as if it were a lantern. The flow of black blood had stopped, and the mouth made odd gasping noises.

How could he speak without air from his lungs?

"I will never forgive this indignity," Anaximander rasped. "I vow before Old Father Night that I shall drag you into the underworld. You shall serve me ten thousand years, crying out in agony every minute."

I shuffled back from this creature and finally felt the two

crossbow bolts protruding from me. One was stuck between my shoulder blades while the other might have hit a kidney. They hurt and made it difficult to concentrate.

By now, the galley had moved dangerously near shore. More crossbow bolts flew. I dodged them. Then planks crunched and the vessel lurched to a sickening halt. Waves pounded it. Planks groaned. Several more crunched. A man in a red cloak roared orders.

Crossbowmen leaped into the water. Many went down over their heads. A few must have hit a sandbar. They waded toward shore with their tentacles holding their weapons high.

The thud of a boot on sand startled me. I twisted around in time for Anaximander's club to connect with my chest. He held it one-handed. The other hand continued to clutch the hair of his head, which dangled like a lantern. The blow pitched me backward, off my feet and I rolled, and groaned. A bolt went deeper into me. The other snapped off. Even through the agony of that, I realized he had swung harder earlier. His coordination was lacking now. Maybe with his head swinging from his hand threw off his perspective.

Anaximander lumbered after me. I scrambled out of the way. His club smashed wet sand. I tried to slash at his hair. He jerked his head out of the way and the club zoomed at me with frightful speed. This went on for several desperate moments.

Then the first crossbowmen reached shore. Some knelt, others stood, and they fired at me in volleys. The bright moon gave them light.

Waves continued to pound the galley. More octo-men waded ashore, rowers, sailors and soldiers. A few had belying pins or gaffs. Some simply angrily waved their tentacles, while others had shield and cutlass.

Then I saw her. The octo-man in the red cloak held my daughter out of the water as he waded toward shore.

"Francesca!" I shouted.

"Daddy?" she cried. "Daddy, is that you?"

Anaximander gave harsh orders to the milling octo-men. A clump of them advanced, too many with lanterns. Crossbowmen ran closer.

"Daddy, help me!" Francesca shouted.

I almost threw myself at the mob of advancing altered men. Anaximander was among them, his head urging them faster.

"Be brave, my darling!" I shouted. Then I ran along the shore and turned hard into the sea. I waded as crossbow bolts plinked the waves around me. Soon I was underwater in a kelp forest.

There I yanked out one of the crossbow bolts. The other in the small of my back…I screamed underwater digging it out of my flesh.

I felt weak, drained, and needed the moon to restore me. I walked

underwater farther from Cape Lodovico and slipped ashore for the moon to strengthen me. Before I could return to the galley, however, dawn neared. So I waded back into the sea to wait out the day.

— 25-

I returned to the beach the following night. The galley lay half-ashore like a stranded whale. Its underbelly had a jagged gash. Masses of sandy footprints showed where they had been. Once, I spied Francesca's smaller footprint.

The thought of her among those altered men, with Anaximander and his lantern-like head-it nearly drove me wild with rage and despair.

I searched for the vacchette, the 'little cow' rowboat. It was gone.

Had Anaximander and the captain rowed the vacchette to the Tower of the East with my daughter? I prayed they had not.

The size of their mob made the trail easy to follow. I ran, and found a split two miles later. Most had climbed the rocks and headed inland. Maybe two dozen or more had continued along the shore. The shore party footprints showed me Anaximander's larger boot-print and Francesca's smaller one.

I fairly flew in my haste. Time had become my enemy. Everything I had to do, I had to do tonight. That was the horror of my condition. If just once an enemy found me during daylight and stole my coin, I would perish. It was a frightening thought. I banished it-for now. It was still night, still the hour of the Darkling.

The shore changed in time. The rocks shrank and then vanished. The sand turned slippery. Reeds appeared. The mushy sand became mud. The mud began to take on the consistency of slime. I must have entered the swamp near Venice. I'd visited Venice once. It had been built atop small, swampy isles isolated from the mainland. Soon I waded past trees thick with Spanish moss. In the still air the dangling moss hung like spent webs. Many of the swamp trees had humped roots, knotted and thick near the trunk, and smaller and ankle grabbing farther away.

A hidden bear roared. At least, it sounded like a bear. I found an octo-man shortly thereafter. He lay face-first in the muck. Blood leaked like oil from jagged wounds in his side. Had a bear done this?

I lifted my head. There were faint cries in the distance.

I took the octo-man's knife. It had excellent balance. Then I ran north toward the cries. Sometimes mud sucked at my boots. Sometimes I splashed through murky water. A huge serpent hissed at me from a tree. Its massive body was coiled seven times around a branch and it flickered its forked tongue. I detoured around it, and I pondered the creature. The swamp in and around Venice had never been like this. Nor had such serpents infested it. Had Erasmo enlarged the swamp through sorcery? Had he seeded it with monstrosities?

It was then I noticed the water, specifically its warmth. The Adriatic Sea was normally much colder than this. Steam rose in places. Soon, the swampy growth thickened and the trees and foliage became jungle-like. The cries had stopped. Instead, I heard roars, but no bear had ever made sounds like that. Amidst the roars were hisses like serpents.

I had no doubt then but that Erasmo had conjured this place. This was African terrain. I'd spoken before to a Moor who had sailed far up the Nile River. He'd trekked to places that by his description had sounded like this.

How could mere barons and knights hope to besiege the Tower of the East? Erasmo could conjure serpents and swamps. He drew the aid of Old Ones, if that's what the Goat Man and Anaximander were. Neither had died from killing wounds. Next time, I would hack each into pieces as I had Lord Cencio. I'd burn their bodies and sprinkle the ashes over a wide area. Erasmo also had the aid of lycanthropes and Orlando Furioso. I just had my dagger and an ability to heal wounds.

I understood better that I could not roam the world like a knight-errant. I was an assassin. I was the Darkling. I'd defeated Lord Cencio because I'd acted like an assassin. I had eliminated him. I had fought the Goat Man like a knight-errant. He yet lived.

They had my Francesca. She had called for her daddy.

The hisses and strange roars increased. I drew aside vines. In a shallow area bathed by the moon, huge crocodiles fought over octo-man remains. One brute locked its jaws onto a torso held by two other beasts. The brute spun. It was an incredible performance. It twisted off a bloody hunk. The giant creature opened its jaws and lunged, and it swallowed the bloody hunk like a glutton.

There were dead crocodiles, too. One had been pin-cushioned with crossbow bolts. Crossbows!

I scanned the shallow area. It had water, reeds and sandbars. Crocodiles battled everywhere. There had to be over ten dead octo-men, although it was hard to tell with all the half-eaten bodies and dismembered tentacles.

I spied a crossbow. Over there…that had to be a pouch of quarrels or bolts. I slipped through the vines, ran and splashed into the shallows. The crocodiles crawled over each other like slugs, but had the sudden speed of wasps. One hissed at me. Another lunged. I jumped, sidestepped, ran and leaped. And I picked up the crossbow. Then I high-stepped as four crocodiles in a row snapped at my ankles. I scooped up the leather pouch of bolts. Then I hurried into the jungle and left the enraged beasts to their grisly meal.

The crossbow was a powerful weapon, although thoroughly hated by many knights. My two back wounds, fortunately, had already

healed. I found that I'd acquired a heavy crossbow or an arbalest, as some termed it. The bow was made of tempered steel. The octo-man had probably used a windlass to crank back the string. I doubted his tentacles had given him greater than ordinary strength. Such was the pull of the crossbow's steel string that a man could not have pulled it over the notch. The stock of wood that held the bow was heavy. Inlaid ivory and pegged parchment decorated it. This was an expensive weapon. Its power lay in the steel bow, which could send an iron-tipped bolt through armor, at least at close and middle range. That's why knights hated it. Any peasant could aim, fire and kill a noble knight with it. Where was the honor in that? The heavy crossbow had a longer range than an English longbow. The crossbow and particularly the arbalest's weakness lay in the windlass.

Winding the crossbow took precious time. Ordinarily, a team of crossbowmen could get off one volley before charging knights would be among them dealing death. Thus, in a battle, a company of crossbowmen fired in volley by line. Or they needed guards to protect them from swords and lances.

I hefted the crossbow and slung the pouch's strap over my shoulder. Then I checked the stars. My lips drew back. I had little time left.

I slipped through the jungle like a shadow. Vines flashed by. A leopard snarled. A log twisted into life as I jumped off it. It developed teeth and a nasty temper. The log had been a crocodile. Once, tentacles lashed at me. No, those weren't tentacles, but thorny vines.

I had never heard of such a tree.

I cocked my head. Waves lapped a nearby shore. Oars clunked. Gripping the ornate stock with one hand, I grabbed the steel cord with the other. I yanked, notched it, and fitted a bolt into the firing grove. Great strength had its uses. Then I darted past trees, more trees, until I broke onto a muddy shore.

I gaped. The Tower of the East rose before me. It was a massive construct, gargantuan. I estimated distances. It was a mile or two away and squatted upon the tiny isles that had once made up Venice.

Obsidian walls rose like titans. The walls stood-it was hard to judge, maybe three hundred feet, maybe four hundred. The city of Byzantium was reputed to have massive walls. I doubted they stood higher than the Tower's. The walls seemed to circuit the isles. Venice had been famous for its many canals. The people had used them like roads. The walls had no openings, no iron-grilled tunnels to suggest such 'roads'. Could Erasmo have conjured more land for the isles?

Towers rose above the walls as high as the walls rose above the sea. A central spire rose above the many towers. It was like a spear hurled at the stars. Mortal man had never built that tower. It was too

tall, too massive. Erasmo was vain. The central tower proved it. Unless…maybe it had a magical significance.

I knelt on the shore and lifted my crossbow. The vacchette bobbed along the water, headed for the tower. Six octo-men rowed. One steered. Anaximander hunched in the center of the vacchette. He held up his head with one hand and kept the other on Francesca's shoulder.

His bearing…I believed he feared the water. That had to be the reason why they'd marched on shore instead of heading straight by water to the tower. Had the altered men carried the vacchette on their shoulders all this way? I thanked fate if that was so. I would never have caught up with them otherwise. I recalled that some stories said demons feared salt water. Old Ones surely acted like demons.

I had one chance to rescue my daughter. From shore, I sighted Anaximander's lantern-like head. I had one surprise shot to rip the head out of his grip and possibly send it into the water. I refused to think about what would happen if I missed.

I pulled the lever-the trigger. The steel bow snapped. The stock shook. The string propelled the crossbow bolt. It sped like a hawk. I watched. I bit my lower lip. A rower cried out. He pitched against Anaximander. The Old One let go of Francesca and hurled the wounded man from him. Water splashed as the octo-man sank into the sea. The other rowers stopped.

I gripped the stock and yanked back the string. I slapped in another bolt and waded into the water. "Anaximander!" I shouted.

Before I could pull the trigger, the brute jerked my daughter in front of him. "Shoot again, and you risk killing her," he bellowed.

"Daddy!" she screamed.

I shook with impotent rage, and I noticed that a gate rose in the distant tower.

At Anaximander's command, the octo-men began rowing. My dear little daughter wept.

A galley slid out of the tower, but I could no longer watch. I'd failed. Now I had to think about tomorrow. Bitter, I retreated into the jungle. They had my daughter. Somehow, I had to rescue her. To do that, I had to remain free, alive, as it were. I thus began to search for a place to hide.

— 26-

I hid in a trunk-branch wedge of a jungle tree. I would rather have hidden in the water, but I feared that during the day crocodiles might swim by and devour me. That day, I dreamed of the tramp of feet, the clank of armor and the muttered oaths of soldiers. It was closer to a nightmare. The dream passed…

I stirred. And with a start, I raised my head. It was night again. The sun was gone. I crouched in the crotch of a branch and its trunk. I listened. There were squawks, hisses, roars and screams. I relaxed. Those were regular night-jungle sounds.

I jumped down onto trampled ground. Grass, fungi and thorns had been thoroughly crushed into mushy pulp by many men. My dream-had soldiers hunted me?

I turned toward shore. Then I reconsidered. Such trampling obviously meant someone had searched for me. Did Erasmo know how the sun sent Darklings into a lifeless stupor? I slipped through the jungle until I reached virgin ground. Fronds slapped my face. Long, thorny vines with unholy life tried to tangle me. I soon gazed on the Tower of the East. The lake or this inlet of the Adriatic Sea was its moat. I studied the walls. Could I scale those? If not, how would I get within?

The water was placid. The battlements were bare of guards, which reminded me of the moon castle. The only sign of life were lights in some of the towers.

After a thoughtful study, I returned to the trampled ground. Now that I considered it, my dreams had hinted about Orlando Furioso. He must have led the search party. I was grateful the lycanthropes had remained behind. Their noses might have ferreted me out.

I stood where I had last night when I'd tried to shoot Anaximander. Instead of a vacchette, an owl skimmed the water. Maybe I could find a log and float over.

I pondered that. Last night, they had sent out a galley. Despite the lack of visible guards, the tower had watchers. That made sense. An army supposedly waited on the edge of the swamp. It was not technically a siege, and yet…. The quickly sent galley showed me the tower-watchers were nervous. They'd reacted fast.

I began to trek along the muddy shore. I spent a quarter of the night and saw more crocodiles, more vine-lashing trees and more and larger serpents. Some of the serpents had mottled skin. Some had stripes like tigers. A few could have swallowed a bull. No swordsman could have hacked those in half. It would take carpenters with two-man saws. The swamp in and of itself was a defensive rampart with

animal guardians. Maybe none of the guardians could effectively stop me, but they would slow a human army.

My marching paid off with sight of the bridge. It spanned from the tower to the mainland. A cavalry troop trotted across it. They went from the tower to the swamp.

I climbed a lightning-smashed tree and considered the tower in light of this knowledge. From this distance, the walls looked smooth. There might be some irregularities, but probably not enough to give me handholds. Had Erasmo conjured vast slabs of obsidian? Or were those bricks? I might drive spikes into mortar and work up the wall like a spider.

Spiders…there was something about spiders that tickled a memory. I set that aside for the moment. My trek had shown me the smooth walls. Of garbage chutes, canal-entrances or tunnels I had seen none. The tower and Venice were unalike in that regard. Erasmo's sorcery must have effected the changes. My problem was simple. How was I supposed to get past four-hundred-foot walls? I would have to walk through a gate or climb a wall. If bricks formed the walls, I could possibly use spikes. If slabs of obsidian formed the walls, I needed a ladder, a very long one. Or, I needed a rope.

I sneered. How would I carry a four-hundred-foot rope to the tower?

The spider image returned. Spiders crawled. Spiders made webs. It was something about webs. Did I imagine myself spinning webs? No. Webs were like silk. Silk-that was it! Silk came from faraway Cathy. Silk was strong. Silk was light. Could I use a silken rope? The possibility made me re-estimate the wall's height. I think the walls were closer to three hundred feet than four hundred.

Now, where could I get a silk rope? And get spikes for climbing? Milan was my first answer. For a price, everything could be found in Milan. Unfortunately, Milan was far from here. That would take many nights travel there and back, another night for finding the right merchant and maybe a night for haggling. Time was my enemy.

I watched the cavalry troop leave the bridge and enter the swamp. Fortune favored the bold. If I were daring, I would walk across underwater. Maybe I could even wait the day underwater.

Had Erasmo conjured sea serpents? I told myself that Francesca had survived so far without me, surely she could another night. My ignorance could kill me, and that wouldn't help her. I needed knowledge. I could ask the Moon Lady through my coin, but she would demand my soul.

I turned from the Tower of the East and headed inland. Lorelei had told me before that the priestess of the Moon had articles that had once belonged to olden Darklings. Those were likely assassin tools. I

would have to gather them, and talk to the priestess under conditions where she would tell me the things I needed to know.

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As I headed west, the swamp quickly thickened into a gloomy jungle of cypress trees and others I had no name for, plus creeper vines. The creepers snaked everywhere. They were barbed and choked lesser plants and they sprouted violet flowers that glowed with a weird luminance. Slime and muck mingled in quietly sloshing pools, while a noxious mist several feet higher than my head distorted sights and sounds.

I debated backtracking and circling around the swamp altogether. Strange, beastly groans echoed among the trees together with the angry hisses of what could only be crocodiles.

Then my crust of ground gave way into a fetid pool of quicksand and I found myself hip deep in it. I waded through the morass, using my fist to break apart the deceptive ground. Unfortunately, I concentrated too much upon that and sank into a hidden hole. It angered me, and I continued to plow through until my head broke the surface some time later. It was good that I didn't need to breathe.

I found a slimy pool and waded into it, cleaning off the quicksand. I'd found throughout the weeks that my Darkling garments were not only tough, but they dried quickly and remained relatively clean if rinsed of mud and gore.

It was then I heard distant shouts, that of men or altered men. With this hateful mist, it was difficult to pinpoint exactly where the sounds originated, although they were ahead of me.

I recalled the cavalry troop I'd seen earlier. Surely neither side wished to fight a night-battle in this poisonous land. And yet, if the so-called rebels wished to besiege the Tower of the East, they had to hack their way through the swamp. It would take soldiers and a commander of extraordinary stubbornness and determination to try. Yet after living through the horror of goat-men and human hounds, the rebels might well have grown bitter enough.

Even though I wasn't a knight-errant, it behooved me to aid the rebels. Who else marched against Erasmo and dared draw their swords against the old powers of Darkness? The rebellious army forced Erasmo to act against them. To slip into the Tower of the East, I might need such a distraction. But if Erasmo's soldiers destroyed the human army, he could use all his altered men to hunt for me.

I hurried through the jungle, headed toward the sounds. In time, I discovered unmistakable signs of an army: trampled areas, torn branches and half-covered latrines.

I slunk from tree to tree and often paused to listen. I didn't want to blunder into Erasmo's troops. Soon, I heard new sounds. That

was…chopping, sawing and hammering. It came from straight ahead. No, it came from my left.

I brushed aside flowering creepers, barely dodged lashing vines. The woody groans of the predatory tree as it leaned toward me convinced me such a plant had never originated on Earth. Or was it a sorcerous experiment? The whitening bones of a large snake lay at the base of the tree.

After I bypassed that, I heard voices mingled among the carpenter sounds. Intrigued and thoroughly sick of this mist, I climbed a large frond tree and saw an amazing sight.

Maybe the many busy bodies disturbed the mist, for it was thinner ahead. It gave the scene a ghostly quality, as if the workers had marched into a land of limbo. Pages and other youths held torches. Beside them, sweaty men swung axes or sawed. Many of the felled trees lay half-submerged in muck. Peasants sloshed around them as they stripped off creepers, fungi and chopped off the branches. Others dragged the branches into piles. There boys selected the right kind of branches, soaked them in tar barrels and readied more torches.

A tree crashed as I watched. Its thump sent up a spray of filthy water. The men worked like ants. Carpenters swung axes into the felled trees and then pushed wedges into the cracks. Big men with mallets drove the wedges deep into the cracks and split the trunks lengthways. That was repeated many times until they had long, crude boards, most with bark on one edge. Those boards were sawed into sections, into planks.

In the middle of all the activity lay the reason for the endless work. Wagons hitched with mules trundled over a plank causeway. Peasants hefted hay bales from the wagons and tossed them onto muddy soil or into shallow puddles. Over that, others laid the planks side-by-side, while others tied the planks together. Huntsmen prowled the outer works with mastiffs.

The causeway twisted back toward the west like a writhing snake. It disappeared into the distance, although I spied a wooden stockade, a hastily built affair. Bonfires burned there, near stacks of planks. Maybe they tried to dry them. Crossbowmen walked the ramparts, and that made me believe the captain-general of this army stored supplies there.

The causeway was wide enough for four knights charging in a row, which made it huge. The expense in planks was prodigious. The amount of labor…the time and men needed…this was proof of deadly intent. The desperate night-work implied a need for speed. Surely the swamp boiled with activity during the day.

The sight earlier of Erasmo's cavalry troop troubled me now more than ever. They hadn't seemed like altered men, but knights. That

suggested Orlando Furioso, likely the best captain in Erasmo's service. Yes. If I were Erasmo, I'd order my soldiers to attack at night.

I dropped down from the frond tree and slunk nearer the causeway. Ahead of the road, men hacked a path.

I glided through the mist, threaded east in the direction the road headed, and I reached a large open area. Soldiers burned fires there. They had chopped down jungle trees to give themselves a wider perimeter and to give the enemy low-lying obstacles. Anything that attacked would have to charge across the felled trees and across open ground. To add to their defenses, crossbowmen and knights waited behind a circle of mantelets. A mantelet was a siege shield, a big thing normally moved forward by three or more men and set into place. In a sense, here in the swamp, each mantelet was part of a portable wall.

The crossbowmen had placed stands behind the mantelet, stands to give them height so they could shoot down from their wall.

I watched from the trees and estimated nearly one hundred men-arms. That was more than a sizeable guard. I grinned, for I spied Carlo da Canale. With his size, big red beard and loud English accent he was unmistakable.

I hailed him. Immediately, over a dozen crossbowmen trained their weapons in my direction. Soldiers roared orders. A trumpet blared.

"Who calls my name?" Da Canale shouted.

"Do you recall the goat-men?" I shouted. "And how I helped you?"

"Paolo Orsini?" he shouted, using the false name I'd given him.

"Don't fire!" I stepped out of the tree line. As I did, I heard low growls that sounded suspiciously like human hounds. The sounds emanated from the trees to my left.

If the hounds had charged, I have no doubt the crossbowmen would have feathered all of us with bolts. But I suspected the hounds were scouts for Erasmo's army, not suicidal creatures.

"I recognize him," Da Canale told the others. He disappeared behind the mantelets. Men pried one aside, and Carlo da Canale of the White Company stepped out of the fort. He came alone, about thirty feet from the wooden wall. And as before, he shook my hand. He did it so those behind the mantelets could see. This time, he studied my features much too closely.

I lifted an eyebrow.

"I do not mean to be rude, signor. But now I remember where I've seen you before. It was in Tuscany, in Avernus, another evil swamp. Do you recall the time?"

I nodded reluctantly.

"You seemed then like one of the living dead. You dodged a

crossbow bolt with unnatural ease and you took another in the chest. Then you killed the man who should have killed you. He was a good soldier, a brave lad from York."

"I regret his death," I said.

"You freed Magi Filippo."

"I killed him later."

Da Canale plucked at his bushy beard. "Ofelia tells a different story."

"Have you noticed that her stories often lack such simple things like the truth?"

He nodded gravely.

"Altered hounds watch your camp," I said.

He scowled, and his gaze swept across the misty tree line.

"I believe Orlando Furioso has brought knights to fight you," I said.

"I've heard rumors about him, Charlemagne's great champion. Such a thing should be impossible. But in this wretched plague, it seems that anything has become possible." He tried to grin. "Signor, I've also heard tales about you."

"Oh?"

"Ofelia-"

I laughed.

"It is unwise to dismiss her, signor. She has come in the sorceress' train. She is an attendant and speaks with the sorceress' authority."

"What sorceress is this?" I asked.

"She owned the castle where Ofelia sold her…cargoes."

He meant the priestess of the Moon. "What has Ofelia said about me?"

Da Canale glanced about as if we sat in a crowded tavern and he wished to make certain no one overheard him. He lowered his voice. "She has only told those she can trust. It is the reason Signor Hawkwood sent me up here. Those who can be trusted are to keep a lookout for you. Only they don't call you Paolo Orsini, but Gian Baglioni. I recall the name, of course. He was a noted soldier, the prince of Perugia."

I asked, "He?"

"You, if you prefer," Da Canale said. "Ofelia told me this prince died and changed into the Darkling. The sorceress wishes you captured at any cost. The reward is great."

"You *are* a mercenary," I said.

Da Canale looked pained. "Please, signor, among knights such as us, that is a churlish suggestion."

"Then I will apologize, signor."

"No, no, there is no need for that. I've thought much about what

Ofelia has said about you. And I've thought even more about what you did for us when you fought the demon lord. I owe you my life, and Carlo da Canale pays his debts."

I clapped him on the shoulder and nodded my appreciation.

"The causeway is a desperate measure," I said.

"Signor Hawkwood is our captain-general," Da Canale said, as if that explained everything. "He is the commander of the White Company, and the lords have wisely given him full command. The sorceress says time is our enemy. So we push hard to reach the Tower of the East. This post, unfortunately, is not only hazardous, but I suspect suicidal." He tapped his nose. "I can smell the enemy."

"Like a human hound?" I asked.

He laughed. "No, signor, I sense them. I can feel them waiting for us. Signor Hawkwood is aware of my ability and my steadfastness. - Can I ask you a favor?"

I hesitated only a moment before nodding.

"You are the Darkling. From what Ofelia says, this makes you the master assassin. Could you scout the jungle, see if an army awaits us? I fear going myself. We sent huntsmen earlier, but they never returned."

I glanced into the misty foliage. These were brave soldiers, likely doomed ones. But then I too was doomed.

"I will do this," I said, "for a favor in return."

"You need but ask."

"You are a man of honor," I said.

Da Canale understood. "I swear by Saint George to say nothing about what you ask me. If it is honorable for me to grant your request, I will swear to complete it."

I liked Carlo da Canale, and I told him my request. It troubled him, but at last, he nodded and swore by his patron saint. It meant that I'd need him alive, and he might have understood that, too. He looked like a bear but I suspect he had a fox's cunning.

"I will slip into the jungle over there," I said, jutting my chin. "What I suggest you do, is lead out a team of halberd-men toward the forest over there." It's where I'd heard the hounds.

"I agree," he said.

We shook hands. Then I waited as da Canale hurried back to the mantelets.

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Da Canale led the halberd-men. The halberd was a murderous weapon. It was eight feet long, with a heavy head that came to a point. On the front it had a blade like an axe and in back a wicked hook. It was a ponderous weapon, but with a strong soldier could cleave helmets, shields, even mail armor as if they were parchment.

As they marched toward the forest, with crossbowmen behind them, I slipped into the jungle in the opposite direction.

A pang of loneliness gripped me as I glided through the mist and between twisted trunks. I longed to lead men-at-arms like da Canale. My private existence as the prince of Shadows…the prolonged silences…with only my thoughts as a companion-I began to loathe this existence. Speaking with da Canale had shown me how barren my life had become.

I ducked under a frond and froze as I squinted into the mist. That had sounded like claws scratching wood. I advanced slowly and spied two human hounds that stared with dreadful intensity into the clearing. I slunk near enough to hear them mutter.

"The heart is the best." The hound had a torn ear and it chuckled softly. "Once you tear open the chest, shove your muzzle into the heart as it beats warm blood. Ah, nothing tastes so good."

"No, you're wrong," the other human hound growled. "Yanking out intestines, chewing them while the man screams, nothing tastes like that."

I slid my deathblade free and came upon them like a shadow. Then I dragged the corpses several feet and covered them with creeper vines. Foul creatures.

I crept through the leafy maze and found a pack headed east. I followed them, and knew a moment of fear when the leader stopped and lifted his nose. He sniffed experimentally.

"We must hurry," another growled.

The altered men, with their naked backs high in the air, trotted faster on all fours. I noted the direction they took and followed at a distance. Sooner than expected, I found the enemy camp.

Its size told me a battle must be in the offering. Strangely, three large tents stood in their jungle clearing. Octo-men with vile tentacles stood around one tent. Satyrs or goat-men milled around the second, while an odd assortment of altered creatures, some with wolf-like snouts, crouched around the third. It was a veritable menagerie of evil, maybe two hundred all told.

Farther back Orlando and thirty knights checked their horses. Despite the jungle, the knights wore plate armor and carried lances, swords and mauls. It told me they meant to fight in the open, which meant either the clearing or the causeway. Signor Orlando spoke to his knights. By his tone, he extorted them. Then he reached for a sword, the scabbard strapped to his saddle. Orlando drew a large sword that glowed in the dark. The knights stirred. Several cheered.

I shook my head in awe. I knew the tales, the poems and minstrel songs. That had to be the magic sword Durendal. The legends of mad Orlando told how he had sought Durendal and Angelica. Ah. I'd also

overhead Erasmo in Perugia. He'd spoken about the sword and the woman as Orlando's payment for service. So why had Erasmo already paid him with Durendal? Maybe it meant Erasmo was desperate. Perhaps he was hurt worse than anyone realized. Tonight it meant that Signor Orlando would be like a god of war. The legends of him and his sword-I had to warn da Canale. He had to warn Hawkwood.

I almost slipped away then, but I saw the Goat Man, the muscular satyr I'd fought before. He strode toward the tents and he wore a turban. I could only suppose the crossbow bolt was still lodged in his forehead. He must have wished that hidden.

At the sight of him, the many kinds of altered men grew tense. Some flapped their tentacles. Others bleated fearfully, while others gnashed fangs. They watched the Goat Man. What looked like apprentice sorcerers-they wore purple robes-hurried after him. Two lugged a heavy chest. One reverently carried an ivory case. That one opened the case and proffered it to the Goat Man.

I craned for a better look. So did many altered men. They grew restless, maybe nervous. The Goat Man raised his hated pipes.

Apprentice sorcerers opened the chest and wrestled out a large idol of the Cloaked Man. By its weight and the way firelight glimmered off it, it appeared to be a golden idol. Countless octo-men, satyrs and beastly men bowed to it. The human hounds barked softly or moaned in dread.

The apprentices staggered while they carried the idol into the largest tent. The Goat Man licked his lips. His grip tightened around his pipes. In a sudden, jerky move, he turned and lunged into the tent after the apprentices.

I waited. The altered men waited. Many shook with fear. I wondered how this helped them prepare to fight.

Eerie piping began. It was a horrible sound, like something from the depths of Hell. Shrieks erupted from within the tent, possibly from the apprentices. A reddish flash illuminated the leathery innards of the tent. The apprentice sorcerers were outlined against the tent wall. The bigger Goat Man danced an obscene jig as he played his pipes. He seemed to face the golden idol. Smoke drifted from the tent flaps and it reeked of brimstone.

Savage-eyed apprentices soon staggered out, their faces a mixture of horror and evil cruelty. They grabbed the nearest octo-men by their tentacles. The pitiful altered men moaned. Two snarled, and I thought they would wrap their rubbery limbs around the apprentices like octopi and squeeze them to death. Instead, the apprentices spoke sharply. The angry octo-men wilted. Each of the chosen meekly followed the apprentices into the tent.

The Goat Man, his hairy chest slick with sweat, bounded out of

the tent and to the next one. There he repeated his performance. Apprentices had carted a Cloaked Man idol into each. Those apprentices dragged other hounds, goat-men and those with fangs for teeth into the tents.

The combined sounds were ghastly, and the feel of evil grew. Then I sensed a grim presence, and something like a dark cloud descended on each tent. The tents shook as if in a gale, flapping madly. Howls and shrieks erupted, the cries of lost souls. Soon, the gale-like flapping stopped. Every altered man outside the tents lay prostrate and trembling. Then a tent-flap opened. Octo-men staggered out. They seemed blind or stupefied and dripped with sweat. Limp apprentices staggered out after them. They hurried to piles of swords, spears and axes and shoved a weapon into each altered man's grasp. Then the apprentices aimed the dazed creatures west toward the jungle.

A tent-flap moved again. The turbaned Goat Man emerged. He wore the evilest smile I'd ever seen.

Apprentices now ran to the trees and pulled back vines. They plunged into the jungle and the Goat Man began to play his pipes. The chosen altered men followed like automatons.

I'd seen enough. I raced through the jungle ahead of them. Fronds slapped me. Mist parted and roots vainly tried to trip me. I had to warn da Canale and his men about what was going to happen.

— 27 -

The battle began with bestially howls as if from a cardinal's torture chamber in Avignon. Then creatures bounded out of the forest. They had the form of the various altered men, some with sleek fur and others with mottled skin. They all bellowed, foamed at the mouth and charged the mantelets. They attacked in great bounding leaps. They came from three separate directions. Their speed was fantastic, the leaps incredible. One after another, altered men crashed against the mantelets. Others bounded over and into the protective circle. They hewed manically. Men screamed and died. I stabbed with my deathblade as da Canale shouted orders.

Wood flew in chunks from the mantelets. The various altered men fought with more than ferocious courage. Spit foamed from their fanged maws. They shrugged off terrible wounds. One octo-man yanked down a mantelet with a single tentacle. The other rubbery limb squirmed in the mud, hacked off by a knight. A wild-eyed spearman stabbed a goat-man in the belly. The creature shrieked and surged forward. The spear went deeper into his body and out the back. The crazed madman reached for the spearman. The spearman let go and turned to run. The goat-man stumbled after him. I stabbed the sobbing creature with the deathblade.

The selected altered men were berserk in the truest sense of the word. They were possessed as vile piping drove them to even greater acts of mayhem. Behind them followed the rest of the altered men, those that had watched what had gone on in the tents instead of being part of the sorcerous rite.

I glimpsed the Goat Man as he stood at the edge of the clearing. He danced and played. Sweat dripped from his chin and from his billy-goat beard. Apprentice sorcerers surrounded him, as did several big goat-men with battleaxes.

All around me, mantelets crashed to the ground. A sea of maniacal, altered faces stared with unholy bloodlust. The possessed hurled themselves upon us. The others followed, chanted and butchered the wounded.

"We must retreat!" a knight roared.

Another knight blew a trumpet. Several seconds later, a distant trumpet sounded.

"If that's help," I shouted into da Canale's ear, "it will never reach us in time."

A frenzied hound leaped at da Canale as he turned to answer me. No. I needed this particular mercenary. I leaped at the human beast, caught it in the air, slammed it down and shoved my deathblade into

its snarling teeth.

We broke under the berserk attacks. Some men-at-arms simply ran in panic. Some bore ghastly wounds and remained in the shattered fort. Most of those fought until foaming creatures slaughtered them. Da Canale, a knot of knights, several crossbowmen and I bitterly fought as rearguard as others marched toward the wooden road. I turned often and ducked under wildly slashing weapons, to stab in return. Crossbowmen drilled their heavy bolts. Still, the altered men pulled us down one by one.

Through the mist, I glimpsed a purple-robed apprentice peer out of the jungle. He might have seen me, for he disappeared into the foliage. Moments later, jungle growth jerked there. Then a crocodile shot into sight. There were roars and hisses. Bigger reptilian monsters followed. They charged out of the swamp. It was a terrible sight. The armored crocodiles ran on stumpy legs. They ran with surprising speed.

Knights shouted for spears. Crossbowmen drilled the creatures at pointblank range. One twenty-foot monster bit a knight's leg and knocked him down. Feathered bolts stuck out of the crocodile's skin. Swords bounced off its armored hide. The crocodile thrashed and its jaws snapped, and it bit off the armored leg. Men-at-arms tried to help. The mighty tail flailed and knocked several to the ground.

It was too much. The crocodiles broke whatever had been left of our discipline. Everyone fled as a mob. Soon only da Canale, a knight and I were left of the rearguard. I grabbed da Canale's arm, and I truly ran. I forced him to run faster than I'm sure he ever had.

The clanking knight tried to keep up. He'd lost his helmet, and he panted. Then he snarled, stopped, turned and lifted his sword. He bought us precious seconds as the altered men hacked at him. The clangs were hammer-blows on my soul. I tried to think about Francesca. I did this for her.

The Goat Man's pipes changed. It might have been a recall. I heard shrill whistles and the crocodiles disappeared.

Carlo da Canale and I didn't stop to see why. We sprinted through the mist and through the hacked out trail that led back to the causeway. The thud of our feet was loud in my ears, and Canale sobbed with effort.

We along with a few others finally stumbled to the causeway. All work had stopped. Some carpenters nervously stood together and clutched axes. They almost hacked at us. Others held torches or heavy mallets.

Our few survivors collapsed, exhausted.

"Run!" I shouted. "Flee to the stockade." I couldn't fathom why the altered men had stopped. I distrusted this lull.

Many of the workers already streamed toward the stockade. They must have fled at the sound of battle. Their footsteps drummed with frantic haste on the laid-down planks.

The axe-men hesitated. They were brave, but I knew they could not stand up against the altered berserks.

"I can't go on," Da Canale gasped.

I glanced east into the mist. Wild cries came out of it. I glanced west at those pounding down the causeway. Despite this lull, there was about to be a slaughter. I sensed it. So I dragged da Canale off the causeway and past the many tree stumps. We crashed through heavy foliage and wet leaves.

"Down," I hissed.

Da Canale collapsed and gasped for air. I knelt and peered past a frond back at the ground we'd just covered. Incredibly, some of the axe-men yet waited.

Then the mist vomited Signor Orlando and his thirty knights. They galloped at the axe-men. Beastly men holding crackling torches ran with the knights. The knights lowered their lances. Their huge war-horses thundered upon the muddy ground. A horn blared. It was too much. The axe-men turned and ran. Most dropped their weapons. Two who stood their ground died as lances split their chests like melons.

It was murder, not war, and I understood now the reason for the lull. It had no doubt taken time for Orlando to work his way through the dark army.

The knights charged the workers running for the stockade. Crazed altered men followed hard on their heels and butchered any they caught.

Beside me, an exhausted da Canale wept silently.

It galled me to have flee. It shamed me. But I was the Darkling, not a knight-errant. I had vowed to become ruthless like an assassin. Now I practiced ruthlessness and it left a foul taste in my soul.

***

I watched the best I could, but mist drifted in the way, the stockade was a goodly distance and I remained crouched. I only saw a little of what occurred but could surmise the rest.

The knights led the charge. Thirty trained killers encased in heavy armor, astride massive steeds and with the best lances and swords in the world, they rode through the workers like the living embodiment of the plague. I suspect only the first workers to flee made it to the stockade.

If the crossbowmen I'd seen walking the ramparts earlier had opened the gate for those survivors, those in the fort would have quickly died. Enemy knights might have dismounted and run through

before the gate closed, or altered men would have done so. The stockade held. That told me the crossbowmen had either thrown down ropes or left the pitiful survivors to their own courage.

The wooden walls would protect the crossbowmen from the crocodiles and from the knights on horse. Were any of the possessed left? How long would they remain berserk?

Screams, metallic bangs and roared orders told me the fight was in earnest over there.

"I'm going to climb a tree and see how they fare," I whispered.

Da Canale put a trembling hand on my arm. He pointed to my right.

I squinted into the misty foliage. Something large moved over there. How had da Canale sensed it and I hadn't? We waited, and we witnessed apprentice sorcerers with whistles leading hissing crocodiles. The giant creatures trotted in their obscene manner and they followed like dogs. The sorcerers plunged into the foliage all around the clearing and in various directions. It made me suspect they laid a trap. Or maybe they hunted for me.

"We must try to slip out of here," I whispered.

Da Canale turned a horrified face toward me. "They broke into the stockade," he whispered. "Listen."

A ferocious 'Hurrah' echoed through the swamp. It was a victorious sound. Had the possessed leaped onto the ramparts? Had those vile altered men clawed their way upward in the hail of crossbow fire?

Smoke chugged into the starry sky. Fires grew and soon threatened to set the swamp on fire. Yet that seemed unlikely. The enemy burned the stockade and probably burned the laboriously gathered planks. The swamp itself was too wet to burn.

In time, Orlando's knights cantered past. Their helmets rested on their saddle pommels. The sweaty-faced killers jested with each other. They laughed and bragged about their deeds. In the rear rode Orlando Furioso. He yet wore his helmet, although he had sheathed Durendal.

One of the knights turned and asked, "Here, signor?"

Orlando waved them on beyond the causeway, toward the hacked-out trail.

By almost leaning out of my hiding spot, I saw several of the knights dismount. The hidden crocodiles and now the knights waiting-

Altered men began to arrive from the stockade. Many bore crossbow wounds. Some dripped with blood. Some gnawed on severed body parts. Like the knights, they bragged about their exploits, even the human hounds with bloody faces.

In the distance, through the jungle, sounded approaching horns.

Da Canale lifted his head, and he gripped my forearm.

“Reinforcements come,” he whispered. “They’ll butcher these curs.”

“The enemy is setting a trap,” I whispered.

Da Canale stared at me. Some of the fear that had gripped him earlier had drained away. “We must warn them, signor.”

“And have Ofelia demand my capture?” I asked.

Da Canale murmured something vague, a promise, I suppose. Yet he was right. I had to warn them.

“You must move as quietly as possible,” I said.

He grinned at me in a ghastly manner. “I was a childhood thief, signor. It’s how I survived London’s bitter winters. Lead on, I can follow.”

A thief and a Darkling, we were a matched pair.

***

We made a wide circuit, too wide as it turned out. And we, or I, misjudged the reinforcements.

Naturally, they marched on the causeway. They advanced like a human snake, a long winding column of knights, men-at-arms and crossbowmen. I suspect the plan had been to feed the reinforcements into the advance guard where da Canale had begun the evening. One hundred men-at-arms behind mantelets should have been able to hold off three or four times their numbers. My mistake was in thinking Signor Hawkwood knew his trade. I had heard of him, and da Canale loved to bray about the captain-general’s exploits. I would have sent footmen first, a shield-wall of footmen and with others to carry torches and lanterns for light.

Signor Hawkwood sent the knights first. Perhaps he did not have a choice. I’ll grant him that. Even among some mercenaries, the privilege of nobility held sway. Most knights demanded the place of honor in battle-the front. Signor Hawkwood was a mercenary, an Englishman. Many in his host were the knights of Milan, Bologna and other Lombard cities. Despite his protests, they might have shoved their way to the fore.

It meant knights on horses led, and knights on horses usually advanced faster than footmen. There was my miscalculation. By the sounds of their original horns, I’d thought I had enough time to circle wide and reach them before they blundered into the trap.

The sounds of battle told me otherwise, the crash of armored knights as their bodies clanked against sod, the loud and painful neigh of huge war-horses as crocodiles broke their legs. The shrill whistles of sorcerers, human hounds baying bloodlust and the weirdly sea-like cries of octo-men meant the enemy had closed the trap.

“Run!” I shouted at da Canale.

Then I did. Leaves slapped at me and branches tried to claw off my cloak. Soon trees were a blur of motion. Our circuit had been

wide. My run took time. Finally, I burst onto a chaotic scene. The stockade roared with flame and gave both hosts all the light they needed. Giant flickering shadows however and charred and roasting corpses in the crackling stockade played havoc on superstitious men.

Some Lombard knights yet remained on horse. They must have fought their way out of the trap and reached the van of those on foot. Unfortunately, those knights were a pitiful few. Fortunately, they had turned to fight. They battled Orlando's knights or they died as Orlando hewed with his witch-glowing Durendal. Altered men fought to the right and left of Orlando and his knights. They faced desperate men-at-arms in a contest of push and shove and hack and stab.

Even after trapping and destroying most of the knights, the numbers were still highly uneven. There were five times more men, but most of the men still marched on the causeway toward the fight. They marched into those doing the fighting and caused a mob of confusion there.

That could spell disaster. Night fighting was normally terrifying. If anything went wrong, courage often wilted. The stockade-sized bonfire helped. The wretched swamp did not, nor that most of the humans stayed on the plank road. Their horrible foes made it worse.

The knights already butchered in the trap and those dying now to Orlando might decide the battle at any movement. If the last knights and the men-at-arms around them should turn and run, the battle could turn into another slaughter as men milled in a confused horde. They would become like sheep-the causeway itself had become a trap.

On their giant horses, the knights, the heroes of each side, hammered at each other. Sword and maul crashed against shields or plate armor. It sounded like a smithy. Yet knight after knight went down before the glowing sword. Durendal became a living wand in Orlando's hands. He was a god of war. He was death. He was the black knight and he was invincible.

I scooped up a fallen pike. It was huge, heavy and unwieldy. I ran and I heaved. The twelve-foot pike wobbled in the air. It sailed over the knights and at Orlando, or more accurately, at Orlando's prized stallion. Was it luck? I was the damned one. I'd thrown to pierce the animal's side. Instead, the pike slithered between its legs as the stallion cantered forward. The pike snapped. That's all I saw, other than the prized stallion pitch to the side and Orlando go flying.

Da Canale staggered up to me. His face was pale and his red beard glistened with sweat.

I grabbed him by the collar and roared orders into his ear. He nodded, sucked down a large breath of air and began to shout orders. Other mercenary captains must have understood. For soon, they beat at the bunched-up soldiers to leave the causeway and form a line,

even a line into the swamp.

We had to bring our numbers to bear.

Orlando regained his seat, but that momentary respite had brought hope to many a man-at-arms. The black knight could lose.

Crocodiles attacked then. Some were sluggish, however, with bulging gullets. They must have feasted on the dead earlier. Still, many men wept in terror of the giant swamp creatures. Our front on the causeway wavered.

That's when I saw the priestess of the Moon. The men-at-arms streaming into lines on either side of the causeway had lessened the mob bunched behind the front-fighters. Other, tough-looking soldiers had finally been able to form a second line. The priestess directed them, pointing here and there. Small Ofelia stood near her, and she looked petrified.

The thirty knights who followed Orlando, nearer twenty now, had awed our knights. The glowing sword terrified. Some of our men-at-arms clawed to get away from that sword.

Fortunately, for the army and for me, the priestess not only employed tough men-at-arms, but ruthless ones. They had formed a second line, a shield-wall. When the last of what must have been the original knights tried to burst through the shield wall to escape Durendal, the ruthless men-at-arms hacked them down. It was brutal, but it might have saved the night. For if those knights had streamed through, they might have jammed into men marching up the causeway and created debilitating confusion, a mob, in other words.

The priestess stood behind her picked guard. Under her direction, Ofelia and other maids in long silver gowns set up a stand and a brazier and poured hot coals into it. The priestess climbed onto a stand. She pitched fistfuls of powder into the stirred fire. Then she waved her arms in complex motions. Her chanted shrieks rose above the din of battle.

She jumped down. Maids in silver staggered to her. Each clutched one end of a carrying pole attached to a silver chest. The priestess produced a key. She unlocked the chest and lifted the lid. She shrieked again, and she wrestled something heavy from the chest.

A silvery ball the color of the moon rose by jerks and sways. It rose above the heads of fighting men. The priestess lifted her arms. She implored. Her hands shone silvery. And suddenly the ball poured out light. The light was bright like a full moon.

Men shouted. They cheered. The light revealed altered men who slunk through the jungle toward them. Men-at-arms charged the surprised goat-men. The goat-men scampered back into the swamp.

On the causeway, men-at-arms, knights and others surged around the thirty, now less than twenty enemy knights. Signor Orlando

hacked two more times. Then he savagely sawed the reins. He turned his mount and galloped back in the direction of the Tower of the East. His remaining knights followed. No one among our host had the courage to chase them.

Using the moon-bright light, men slew crocodiles in teams. Then the battlefield emptied of enemies. The besieging host had driven off Erasmo's force, but at a wretched cost.

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The rebel camp was in turmoil, a seething cauldron of pain, fear and grim determination.

The pain bled into the air with the cries of the horribly wounded. The battle last night had proved costly. The bonesetters and barbers had worked throughout the day and now into the next night. Many of those wounded perished in raving delirium. The groans, the mumbled last rites and the sounds of spades cutting earth for a mass grave added to the misery.

The swamp began several hundred paces from the edge of camp. That was the beginning of the causeway. The Alps rose in the other direction to the west. The moon was bright enough to show snow-covered peaks in the distance.

The camp was a sprawling city of tents. There were big tents, small tents, silk ones and old, leathery affairs. There were tents for horses, some for weapons and others for barrels of salted fish. Now there were tents for the badly wounded and dying.

That brought out the fear, as did the countless retellings of the swamp fighting last night. The giant crocodiles, the possessed and Orlando Furioso with his magic sword Durendal frightened the soldiers the more they thought about it. Work had begun on a wooden palisade to protect the camp. Worse, soldiers had begun to slip away, to desert. It had only been in ones and twos so far. Yet there were already camp orators who openly spoke about the futility of this fight. Men could not stand against demons. Men could not face witchery and hope to retain their humanity. Too many campfire talkers dwelt on the horrors of becoming altered men. That particularly had become a canker, and the dread of it bored away at soldiery courage.

It also brought out grim determination in others. Signor Hawkwood had ordered patrols around the sprawling camp to net those who tried to run. Whipping posts arose in the center of camp. Soon there would be new cries, those begging for mercy. It wouldn't be long before gallows arose, too. Guards marched down the lanes. They bore halberds, crossbows, lanterns and mastiffs. They marched in groups of fifteen or more. They wore white sashes, or pinned a white rose to their chest or clipped white-painted straw to their cap. As part of the White Company they deemed themselves above fear.

The camp held more than soldiers and pages. There were whores, armorers, smiths, servants, peasants and merchants. They were the usual attendants of men-at-arms in the field. They drained the fighter of coin while providing him with his endless needs. The horses, mules, dogs, cattle, goats and herders also added to the noise and confusion.

Since leaving the swamp in Avernus, I hadn't seen so much humanity in one place or so many animals.

"I will not commit treason, signor," Da Canale told me.

We stood under a tree outside the camp and near the swamp. He held the clothes I needed. So I realized he wished to be reassured. He had told me last night that he paid his debts. This was my payment for scouting for him yesterday.

"The one you call the sorceress holds possessions of mine," I said.

"She has heard about your fighting with us last night." Da Canale glanced around and lowered his voice. "She knows I spoke to you at the mantelets. She summoned me this afternoon and questioned me concerning our talk. I told her you warned us about the attack. She called for Signor Hawkwood and told him about the seriousness of capturing you. She claimed you serve a goddess of Darkness. She promised me double the former reward for your capture. And she began to threaten me with the stake if I held back needed information. Fortunately, Signor Hawkwood cleared his throat. That stopped the witch from finishing her threats."

Da Canale gave me a searching look.

"I am Gian Baglioni of Perugia."

"She said Gian died."

I slapped my chest. "The dead don't do that."

He nodded, but he still appeared troubled.

"The Lord of Night destroyed my city," I said. "He stole my wife and I know he holds my daughter."

"You swear this is true, signor?"

"I swear it on my honor." I lowered my voice. "You realize I have gained abilities. I do not deny this. I have become a prince of Shadows. Now I need the tools your sorceress keeps. I need them so I may slip unawares into the Tower of the East and slay its grim lord."

Da Canale nodded thoughtfully.

"Do you think this army can drive through the swamp and reach its shores? Do you think it can storm the hundred foot walls that surround the Tower of the East?"

"We are doomed," Da Canale said. "Last night showed us that. We were lucky to have survived. We faced a pittance of the Lord of Night's hosts. If we flee, however, we are also doomed, as he will hunt us down. The Lord of Night is revengeful above all else."

"You're a man of the world, signor. You realize that sometimes a knife can accomplish what a dozen swords cannot."

"That is true." Da Canale shoved the bag of clothes and weapons toward me. "You are our last hope, signor. But if you are caught…."

"I am a prince of Shadows."

"Listen, signor, and I shall explain the camp's layout."

I took the bag of clothes, the sword and boots. I listened. Then I shook Carlo da Canale's hand and faded into the night. I watched him hurry back to the camp, and I dearly hoped he had spoken the truth.

***

An hour later, I spied the camp from a ditch.

Guards marched past. After they turned a tented corner, I scrambled to my feet.

I wore mercenary garb now, soft leather breeches, a dark shirt, a silk cape and hat. Along with my knife, I bore a slim sword. I had bathed. My Darkling garments and boots were stashed in a sealskin bag in the swamp.

I desired to speak with the priestess of the Moon. It was one thing for da Canale to realize this army's plight, but why hadn't the priestess insisted on a siege train? I'd thought to find rafts, moveable towers, catapults and maybe one of those newer cannons here. Did an admiral wait for the army to reach the inner edge of the swamp before he brought in his galleys? If so, I needed to know.

I marched down a lane past a creaking wagon and its driver. Fortune favored the bold. Tonight I would be brazen, even though I realized the priestess had many searching for me.

In this sprawling camp, despite the countless cries of pain and the bitter debates, soldiers diced, drank and snored. They sharpened weapons, repaired armor and tumbled with whores. Lantern oil and smoky torches, cooked meats and horse-piss smells mingled with leathery odors and too much spilled blood. It produced the unique stench of a military camp. Dogs growled. Others wagged their tails. Squires ran errands. Women screamed in rage, in pleasure, in pain and wept over the dying.

The foot patrols among the tented lanes grew more frequent. Then I saw Ofelia. She had six burly men-at-arms behind her. She held a pendant in her hands, and she concentrated upon it. She stopped suddenly. She looked up and peered in my direction.

I'd stepped into a tent as a precaution.

She looked at the pendent in her hand, peered hard. Then she spoke fast to the six burly men. They drew swords and stalked toward my tent.

I slipped out the back. The priestess used magic to try to locate me. This would make things harder. I had no choice. I'd seen the Tower of the East's walls. I needed Darkling tools.

I hurried, and I soon spied the priestess' silver tents behind a wooden palisade. Vigilant crossbowmen patrolled the walkways. Guards with nets and halberds stood at the gate.

I made a wide circuit to try to throw off Ofelia. Then I ducked behind some tents and approached from a different direction. I waited

and timed the crossbowmen's circuit. Then I strolled behind a tent pitched beside the palisade. I pretended to make water, glanced both ways and leaped. I clutched the top of the palisade, swung up and over and landed inside the priestess' defenses.

In an easy stride, I moved behind a tent. It was more orderly here, the talk subdued. There was a lack of dice games or ladies of the evening. Then I saw a maenad-a maiden in a silver gown-rush out a tent and hurry toward the main gate.

I listened keenly for an outcry. I had little time. I worked near the middle tent, unbuckled the sword and coin pouch and rid myself of the cap and cape. I knelt and wriggled under the tent.

It took a glance to orient myself. The priestess stirred on a cot. She had furs for blankets and several silk pillows. I spied many chests. Some looked like pay chests. Others surely held magical paraphernalia. A goblet half-filled with wine stood on a small table. The plate held greasy chicken bones.

I crawled to her cot, rose to my knees and looked down. She was beautiful, with regular skin, not silver. The small chin made her seem elfin like Lorelei. They could have been sisters. Her eyes snapped open. She opened her mouth. I suppose to scream. I pressed a hand over her mouth. It put lines in her forehead. She became stiff.

"I'm here to talk," I said.

She nodded fast.

I drew my knife, the evil blade. I touched it to her cheek.

"Let's be clear on a few matters," I said. "I want answers. You want to live. I'll let you live if you answer my questions. Does that sound fair?"

She nodded again, just as fast. I didn't trust that speed.

I tapped the blade twice against her fair cheek. "A cut from this knife-"

"Hmmm, hmmm," she tried to say.

"Scream and I'll cut you," I said. I took away my hand.

She drew a deep breath. She worked her mouth. "Can I sit up?" she asked.

"No. Lie as you are."

"Is this a rape?"

"You need to listen," I said.

"Don't get angry."

"No! Answer my questions. Don't seek to give me commands."

I think she longed for light. Her tent walls were thick, or there was magic at work. The sounds of camp were muted here. Little light penetrated, although enough for me.

"I'm surprised you made it this far," she said.

"I am the Darkling."

She scowled. It marred her beauty. Then her features smoothed out. I think she remembered I could see in the dark.

"This army can never break into the Tower of the East," I said.

"Can I ask you a favor?"

"Ask," I said.

"Can you remove the knife?"

"First give me answers."

"Ones that you like or the truth?"

"For a naked woman with an evil knife resting upon her face you have a lot of daring."

"My guards will hear whatever you do."

"Now you threaten me?" I asked.

"I just want *you* to have all the facts."

I tapped her cheek again. I liked the way it made her flinch. "This knife is all the facts you need, milady. Now…tell me. How is this army supposed to take the Tower of the East?"

"Signor Hawkwood has sent messengers back to Milan. He wants siege engines."

"How will these engines cross the lake?"

"You've seen the tower?" she asked.

"You mean you haven't?"

"Erasmo's magic guards against mine. We've sent scouts, but none has returned. If you've seen the tower, you need to speak to Signor Hawkwood. You can tell us what to expect."

"I expect Ofelia to show up sooner or later," I said. "What exactly does she see in the pendant?"

"Have you spoken with the Moon Lady lately? I truly believe it would be in your best interest. You shouldn't let Lorelei guide you. She doesn't understand all the complications. The Moon Lady can-"

As the priestess spoke, I sheathed the deathblade and drew the knife I'd picked up from a dead octo-man. I pricked the tip under her chin, made her arch.

"You talk too much," I said.

"I know you need silk," she whispered, "enough to make a really long rope."

I kept the pressure under her chin.

"I have old weapons," she said. "Ones a former Darkling used. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"How would you know that?"

"I have a chest. It's over there. I can open it for you."

"Why do you think I need a rope?"

"The Moon Lady told me."

"What else is in the chest?"

"Tools of former Darklings," she said.

“And you’ll simply give them to me?”

“I’m bargaining for my life, aren’t I?”

I wondered if they feared Erasmo and his trumpet more than my being free. The Moon Lady must understand that this army had no chance of breaking into the Tower of the East. I removed the knife.

The priestess felt under her chin and rubbed her fingers together as if testing if I’d made her bleed.

I thrust a robe at her and realized she couldn’t see it. Or she was a wonderful actress. I pressed the robe onto her.

She slid it under the blanket, wriggled into it and then drew back the covers. “Can I light a candle?”

“You know where the chest is,” I said. “Crawl to it.”

She did crawl, felt around. When she finally knelt at a small bronze chest, she frowned, with her hands on top of it.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I forgot where I put the key. Isn’t that silly?”

I found the deathblade in my hand. This woman was a viper. She could strike in an instant, or maybe she simply played for time, hoping for Ofelia or others to show up. I sheathed the knife and looked around for rope.

“I suppose I’ll need a candle after all. Oh!” she said.

I swung her arms behind her back and lashed her wrists tight. She opened her mouth at my command and I stuffed in a wadded cloth. I gagged her, lashed her feet and laid her out on a rug. Anger colored her cheeks. She stared with concentration. I suspected she listened hard.

I wondered then if this was a subtler trick than I realized. Maybe she wanted me to open the chest. Maybe that was the point. Out of it would spring…something deadly, something to trap me. I inspected the chest. It was bronze, with bronze hinges. Odd engravings decorated it. The lock seemed intricate. I doubt I could force it open. An axe would dent it before it broke, and that would make a din. I needed the key.

She knew where it was. She might tell me if I knocked her around, but that might prove too noisy. Maybe I could just carry it out. No. I would look like a thief hunched over with that.

I searched the tent and discovered a small iron pin.

The priestess made “hmmm, hmmm,” noises.

I knelt by the chest and inserted the pin. I felt tumblers through it. *Click, click-snap!* I grinned, removed the pin and made ready to lift the lid. A premonition warned me. I hesitated. Then I shifted around to behind the chest and raised the lid.

Pfft! Something sharp flew out. *Thunk!* It hit a tent pole. I crept to the pole. There was a tiny dart. A foul-smelling green poison stained

the wood. I glanced at the priestess.

She lay perfectly still, with her eyes wide and as she listened intently. I had crept to the pole. I crept back to the chest. I suppose she waited for a body to thump to the ground. I lifted the lid. The hinges were soundless. I saw a coil of silk rope. The strand was fine, too fine for a man to climb. I took it out. It was of lightweight.

"Hmmm, hmmm?" she mumbled. And she squirmed.

I let her squirm. It might be interesting to see what she would do.

There was a silver case. I took it out and raised the lid. There were metal bars inside that seemed designed to hook together. There were also three…they looked like crossbow bolts. I found a bag with little contraptions that made no sense. I found another case that had a long, thin pipe in three sections. Maybe fifteen puff-tipped darts like the one in the tent pole lay in tiny rows. A vial of green liquid was there, too. A blowpipe and poison darts-just what a Darkling needed. Lastly was a belt with the strangest device attached. It had a long handle and a spindle. I had no idea what its purpose was. Maybe I could figure it out later.

The priestess had worm-crawled and rolled three-quarters of the way to the entrance before I intercepted her.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She stiffened with fright.

"I survived your little trap," I whispered.

I carried her to the cot and lashed her to it. It would take her time to free herself from that.

"Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm," she said.

I patted the top of her head. "Yes," I said, "I'm making a dreadful mistake. I'm sure there're a dozen more lies you would like to tell me. And I know you'll repay me horribly for these indignities."

She shook her head. "Hmmm, hmmm."

"You're very earnest, and convincing. Here, lift your head so I can untie your gag."

Relief showed in her eyes. She lifted her head.

As she did so, I went to the edge of her tent. I heard a commotion outside, shouting. It sounded like Ofelia argued with a guard. Before anyone entered the tent, I rolled outside.

I strolled to the inner palisade with my loot of ancient tools. I climbed it and motioned to several crossbowmen. They hurried to me. I clouted each with a small bag filled with sand and laid them down on the rampart. A gong rang then, an alarm. Guards began to shout.

"He's on the wall!" Ofelia cried. "I see him."

I had time to watch crossbowmen aim. Then I dropped over the palisade and began to stroll through the main camp.

— 29-

Loud rumbles shook the Tower of the East. It sounded like an angry storm cloud. Strange lights flickered above the fortress. Did this mean that Erasmo had finally begun his Grand Conjuration?

The previous night, I'd examined my new Darkling tools. Each presently rested in a sealskin bag, wedged among cloth so they wouldn't clink and give me away. There were sounds of battle from the distant causeway, while in the surrounding jungle altered men and a lycanthrope searched for someone, likely me.

I'd climbed a giant jungle tree. It was a massive old thing. It must have grown for hundreds of years. It made me wonder how Erasmo had put the jungle around Venice, or the ruins of dead Venice. There simply wasn't enough time for the trees to have naturally grown this large. I climbed like a shadow, and I pondered the problem. I think the answer was that Erasmo had transported the entire jungle. The warm water, the crocodiles…those came from a hot clime. They were unnatural for ruined Venice.

The towering trees grew close together. Many of their branches intertwined with neighbors. I stowed my cloak in the bag. I tied the bag to my Darkling belt, the one I had acquired last night. I crouched on a high branch like a monkey and tried to ignore the odd happenings above the Tower of the East. I sprang. The branch dipped under my weight. I should have thought of that. I couldn't afford mistakes. My fingers brushed the targeted branch. They slid off because my jump had been too short. I fell, and I grabbed for a different branch. My hold took. The branch bent under my weight. It snapped. But that gave me time. I grabbed a heavier branch. It, too, bent, but it held. I scrambled toward the new trunk.

I collected my wits and tried another leap. Slowly, I leapt from tree to tree. The last tree grew beside the salty sea. I climbed out on a branch that hung over the water. There would be no tracks showing anyone I'd waded out there.

I removed the Darkling belt, my boots, most of my clothes and put them in the watertight bag. The Tower of the East no longer rumbled. That was almost worse, the lull before the lightning storm. Grim menace radiated from it. I held up my hand. I felt heat, a dry and awful thing, radiating from the tower.

I studied the gargantuan fortress. Erasmo must have conjured it from another place, for no one could have built something so huge. Yet what kind of Earth made castles like that?

"Quite stalling, Gian."

I nodded, and I jumped. With a splash, I plunged into the water.

As I sank, I listened for sea monsters. In moments, my feet hit mud. Dirt billowed upward. Even this close to shore, the water was murky. The tower was that way. I'd memorized the direction. I began to walk.

The mud became grass. The grass grew into wavy fronds, the fronds into thirty-foot strands that slowly waved back and forth. I used my hands to shove aside seaweeds. There were strange sounds, groans, distant clicks and rumbles. Visibility lessened. The pressure increased as the slope went down, down, down. I kept walking. Then I spied a dark shape. It was huge. I stopped. It glided past. A terrible moan sounded close by. It was an eerie noise. I kept perfectly still. Even when I felt the presence behind me, I kept statute-like. The feeling grew acute. It moaned again. It sounded as if it made the noise in my ear. My back itched. I yearned to turn around. I kept still instead.

The water stirred. Something huge moved behind me. The feeling lessened. It moaned again. It sounded farther away. That was a sea monster. Erasmo must have conjured them. More time passed and the awful feeling dwindled to a painful memory.

I kept my lonely station and I waited. Finally, I could no longer stand it. The tower had rumbled and heat had poured from it. I had little time left. I had to hurry. So I resumed my trek.

Part of the reason I had not turned around to look at the sea monster was so I wouldn't lose my sense of where the tower stood. I moved in slow motion and entered another kelp forest.

Walking underwater was strange. The liquid resistance slowed every action. It would likely prove impossible to hack or slash effectively with a knife underwater. Even a sword or axe would likely prove futile. A spear would be better. I hoped I didn't need to fight underwater. I certainly wanted to avoid any sea monsters.

The strange excursion finally ended. I trudged upslope and saw the rock before I climbed it and broke the surface. The Tower of the East loomed above, and it was hotter than before. I felt waves of heat pouring off the massive structure.

The rumbles had resumed. They were long and rolling things. It made the walls shiver. It made those walls that rose forever look unsteady. The obsidian seemed all of one piece, as if giants had laboriously chiseled it from a mountain. Now I feared the rumbles would increase and shake it apart.

I felt small beside it. I climbed onto the lip of stone, the several yards of rock that extended beyond the wall. I felt the vibration in my feet.

I opened my sack and removed my boots and garments. I buckled on my Darkling belt. I stood beside the titanic wall. I was a fly, a speck, and as such, I hoped to enter.

Once dressed, I took out the silver case. It contained hooked rods. I assembled them into a skeletal crossbow. As I did, I heard crackling sounds like a giant fire, a monstrous forest blaze. I looked up. It was still dark beside the tower. But now a headier sense of doom filled me, and the heat increased. It felt at that moment as if the Earth wound down, as if these were its final hours.

I wanted to weep. Francesca was in there. Maybe Laura and Astorre were as well. I knew beyond doubt that either Erasmo readied himself for the Grand Conjuration or that it was already in progress. It made my actions seem futile. I was likely too late. He knew I was coming and he had begun before I could stop him.

"You don't know that," I snarled. "Move! Act while you still can."

I cocked my crossbow. I chose one of the three bolts and attached my silken line to the end.

I'd reasoned out what the spindle and rotating arm did. The line was too fine for me to climb it like an ordinary rope. Fortunately, the silken rope had fantastic strength. It easily bore my weight. I'd tested it last night. The spindle and rotating arm were ingenious. Once I hooked the bolt to the battlement, I would tie the other end of the silk line to the spindle. Then I would rotate the arm and haul myself up.

I raised the stock to my shoulder, ignored the strange flickers of light, sighted and squeezed the trigger. The steel bow snapped and up flashed the bolt. It trailed the fine silken line behind. It zoomed courageously, climbed, climbed, and then slowed and reached its final height.

The bolt tumbled down.

With a sick sense of doom, I rewound the line and cocked the crossbow again. I held the stock perfectly still. I muttered to my bolt. I told it I had to get within, and I fired. As it sped upward, I wondered if the Moon Lady might see to it that my bolt made it to the towering battlement. No. She did not. The bolt failed like before and fell back to my waiting hand. I couldn't fire my bolt high enough. A third try would be meaningless. I rewound the line and stowed it in the bag.

An eerie voice spoke then. It spoke from the grand heights. The walls shivered and grated ominously. Chips of obsidian slid off and splashed into the water. A clap of thunder sounded, and then all was still. The walls stopped shaking.

It left me shaking. With trembling hands, I unhooked the sections that made up my skeletal crossbow and stowed it in its carrying bag. Like a peddler chased by hounds, I began to race around the base of the wall. I studied the tower as I ran. Soon, I noticed a strong urine stench.

A hundred feet above me was a grate of sound. I yelped, because something moved. I thought it was the end. Instead, human waste

gushed out. The foul mess hit the water. Fish darted up. I strode away, disgusted. After several dozen strides, however, I stopped and looked back.

Fish had come up. Catfish, crabs and other sea creatures fed off the refuge. I snapped my fingers. That meant…meant…there had to be a reason why enemy galleys never approached the Tower of the East. Yes, of course. I wondered why I hadn't seen it earlier. Because of caves, I told myself.

I no longer had time to be squeamish. The end of the world as I knew it was near. I may already have been too late. Yet I had to try. I had to keep moving. I was the Darkling, the Moon Lady's reluctant champion.

I studied the water and the tower as I hurried. Something about the water changed shortly. This part of the tower faced the open sea. That would make sense. If you kept sea monsters to attack ships, to guard your castle, you kept them near where the enemy would appear.

I removed my boots, my clothes and climbed down the rock and into the water. I found a cave. It always came down to caves. Grass and seaweeds grew everywhere in abundance, but not around the cave entrance. The cave went into the rock, the rock the tower stood on.

I climbed out of the water, ripped opened my bag and assembled my skeletal crossbow. Then I took out a howler. They were small and metallic, with springs and latches. I'd discovered their use last night. I twisted the spring and flicked the switch. Then I set down both the crossbow and howler and stowed my boots and clothes in the bag. I tied the bag tight. I made sure everything was ready. Then I readied the crossbow and set the howler in the groove. I judged angles, muttered to myself and flicked the switch, aimed, shot. The howler tumbled end over end. I winced as I watched. I had shot it too high. If it went off while in the air-

It plopped into the water. A half-second later, I heard something. Would sea monsters hear that? Would they care? I grabbed the bag and watched the water. It had to work, or were the sea monsters all away. I could have just-a vast shape shot out of the cave. It was like an eel, but longer than a galley. It had rows of teeth. Another followed behind. They swam wickedly fast. They seemed angry. A third and fourth monster shot out after them. I waited. Was there a fifth?

I slipped into the water and climbed down the rock. I aimed toward the cave mouth, soon hung above it. The murky water hid the sea monsters. I hoped it hid me from them. Despite my urgency, I waited. No more monsters shot out. I let go of the rock and floated down before the entrance. Once I touched bottom, I trudged as fast as I could.

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The tunnel twisted forever. It was darker here, smelly and foul. I shoved my feet against rock and angled my head forward. What if the eels returned before-I shook my head, told myself not to think about it. Even so, I imagined the eels, the sea monsters, zooming back. They would swarm like crocodiles. Those teeth would chomp and I would be many grisly chunks of flesh.

I glanced over my shoulder. Did the water stir? My hand tightened around the sealskin bag. I churned my legs and still moved too slowly. I rounded another bend. A terrible moan echoed behind me then. I knew that was the sea monster's call. They had returned. They headed for the cave and they might already be in it. I'd hoped that once out they might explore.

Another moan sounded and a third. I already surged through the water as fast as I could. The light increased. If I still had a heart, it would have pounded. It would have hammered blood through my body. Everything lay in the bag, including my knife. I might have scooped up a rock. It would be as effective as my deathblade here-useless. There had been four sea monsters. Had all four returned?

Two, three or four, the number made no difference. They were longer than a galley. Their teeth were like a hundred deathblades all stabbing at once. Maybe I should have kept another howler and dropped it when the first eel appeared. I could rummage in my bag for it.

A shriek echoed behind me. I looked up. Water shimmered above, light. Wild hope flared. I might make it yet. I surged to the rock. It was craggy but slimy. I thrust the end of the bag into my mouth and clenched it with my teeth. I began to climb.

I heard them! The water carried the terrible sound of their swimming. My hand slipped off a slimy rock. I hugged the wall. I desperately tried to stay on. If I lost my grip and sank, it would be over. Erasmo would win. I kept climbing, and a second later, my head broke the surface. The pit was a pool sixty feet in diameter. The rocky wall went up another thirty feet. A guardrail rose above that. The light came from a central basin, it roared as flames danced. I might have heard other sounds. Water was still in my ears so I wasn't sure.

I surged up out of the cold water. I climbed much too slowly. The thought hit that I could climb faster without the bag. I clung to the rock with one hand, grabbed the bag with the other and flung it wildly. If I missed, if it didn't clear the railing, it would plunge back into the pool. Then I would enter the fortress of my enemy stark naked, without any of my Darkling tools. The bag sailed. I climbed. I

couldn't afford to watch. I heard a thump and took that as success. A splash would have signaled failure.

I dared increase my rate of assent. The rock was cold, slick with moisture. In other places it was sharp. I cut my hands and feet.

Then water sluiced off something huge. It bellowed rage. It made the air rank with a stench. I twisted my head and looked down into the face of a sea monster. The mouth could have swallowed an elephant. The frilled gills made it seem obscene. It was green and slimy. Another head poked up, and a third. The three eel-like monsters glared at me. Then the first shot up like a striking snake.

I desperately shifted sideways. The monstrous head smashed the rock where I'd just been. Chunks rained off. One rock struck my neck.

The next few seconds were the most horrible since my return. One after another the monsters struck. They smashed the rock with jarring force. My hold shook. My body trembled. I acted like a lizard. I shifted one way, the other, down and up. The monsters bellowed louder and louder. They had sounded angry at first. Now they were furious, close to berserk. The roars deafened me. It must have woken the entire tower.

Then the most glorious thing happened. My hands locked onto the metal of the railing. I hoisted higher, scrambled up over the rail and onto the wet floor. My bag lay several feet distant. I was in the Tower of the East, and for this second undiscovered. The bellows of the sea monsters still crashed around me. I grabbed my bag and dashed to a hidden niche.

It was a big room made out of rock. The light came from above the railing. A fire burned in a giant basin. Double doors stood sixty feet away.

I stood in dancing shadows in a curve in the wall and put on dark clothes, my cloak, boots, belt and deathblade. I wanted to laugh, to join the sea monsters in their bellows.

The doors creaked then. I heard squeals, rusty wheels. I peered around my niche. An octo-man entered backward. He pulled something. Ah, it was a sled with small wheels. Bloody slabs of beef lay on it.

"What's all the shouting for?" he asked. "I fed you six hours ago. Go into the bay if you're so upset." He pulled the slab to the edge of the railing.

I poised on the balls of my feet.

He picked up a long pole with a hook on the end. He stabbed that into the first side of beef and grunted as he hefted it off the slab. He carried it and hurled the beef over the railing. Then he dropped the pole and put the tip of his tentacles on the metal. He watched, and he screamed.

I grasped his ankles and heaved him up and over. He sailed into the watery pit, and the sea creatures gobbled him up. After that, I hurried for the door.

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The sky sickened me. It blazed with titanic flames. It made the tower hot like a desert. The vast flames cycled through colors: yellow, orange, red and purple. They flickered like lewd dancers, erotic one moment like sinuous women, and then they leered like perverted sadists the next. The sky was not one continuous flame or band of fire. Each licking flame was its own individual, a gargantuan thing.

Behind them was darkness, the night. I found no source for these flames. It made the air hazy. It felt as if I had stepped into the antechamber of Hell.

I was on the roof of a three-storey building. The inner tower was like a city with many low brick houses. They squatted close together, seemed to huddle in misery. I'd seen altered men in all their various forms. None of them looked up at the flames. They hurried with heads down and those that had them with shoulders hunched.

Why hadn't I seen the flames from the outside? I'd felt the heat. What had caused the rumbles? This was more of Erasmo's evil sorcery. Just as bad, I felt from time to time as if some of the flames glanced at me. It made me feel conspicuous, as if I had done something wrong. I remembered the living flame on the doomed Earth. Was he the family dwarf?

Luckily for me, the flames weren't the sun. As bright as they were, they didn't leech my strength.

I desperately needed information. I needed to find my daughter, my wife and son. But first, I needed to find Erasmo. An assassin had one stroke. His skills demanded that he place it exactly right the first time. He would likely never get a second chance. I'd failed the first stroke against Erasmo in the otherworldly cave, and had almost died. I should have died there on that dead Earth. Now I had that rarest of things among assassins, a second chance. If I failed again, I would likely fail forever. And my family would remain his prisoner forever. I needed information to guide my single stroke into exactly the right chest.

The low buildings huddled in misery. Towers rose in places, six of them. Roads linked each, and the roads made a familiar pattern. I remembered the pattern Orlando had made in Perugia. Erasmo had used the pattern to journey from here to there. The gargantuan Tower of the East stood in the center of the other towers. All roads or lines led to it.

High in the main tower light blazed from a window. Now that I studied them more closely, it seemed as if the giant flames in the sky

bowed down toward the window. The moment I recognized that, one flame shifted unnaturally. Its tip dipped low, and for a moment, I imagined it had eyes. Our eyes met, and the flame licked back-in shock perhaps.

Those weren't flames, but demons, or some other supernatural beings. They were here…I don't know why. I had two suspicions. One, they might help Erasmo blow the trumpet. Two, maybe in some manner they helped him heal from my cut.

I lowered my eyes. Maybe it was sacrilegious to look up at them.

Ah. There was the sign. That's what I wanted. A door opened in one of the lesser towers. I had questions. I doubted altered men could tell me. Now a sorcerer, one of Erasmo's magician henchmen, could likely give me useful answers. A sorcerer darted into that tower.

I dropped from my perch and landed like a cat. Then I used shadows and kept up my hood. Few altered men were aboard. Many were likely outside the castle fighting. I hoped Signor Orlando was out there, and both the lycanthropes, too.

The giant flames crackled. They poured heat. Whenever I stepped out of shadows, I felt the scrutiny of the sky. I should have known the Tower of the East would be a door into some strange evil. This was Erasmo's place of power.

I hurried from shadows and toward the foot of a tower. I stepped onto one of the main roads. A shock struck me, a current of power.

I leaped off the road. The feeling stopped. What was that? I needed answers. I needed them fast. I resolutely stepped onto the road. The shock flowed through me again. It made my teeth ache. I strode to the door and hammered on it with my fist. I banged impatiently. I kept at it. The current numbed my feet. It was making my eyelids heavy.

The door swung open. A beefy altered man glowered. He was the biggest I'd seen. He wore a cloak, a cap, but his features were inhuman. He had a snout like a wolf and a black tongue. I shoved him aside as I stepped in. I slammed the door behind me. The current stopped.

I stood in an atrium. There were busts everywhere and they were all of me. These had the spade-shaped beard and Erasmo's evil stare. Tapestries hung in places. They showed hellish scenes of leering succubae and other abominations. In some of them Erasmo strode as a conqueror. In others, he was a vile celebrant. When I say Erasmo, they were all images of me.

What was his fascination with me? I'd hated it before. Now I resented it. It was a personal affront. If he was going to be a Lord of Hell, he should do it with his own features. He shouldn't smear my name and likeness throughout all eternity.

“Who are you?” the altered man growled.

I stabbed him, dragged him to a closet and shoved him in. Then I yanked down a tapestry, sopped some of the blood and threw that after him.

There were more rooms. They were empty. Finally, I found stars. I bounded up. They went in a spiral and kept going what seemed forever.

I ran and grew enraged that Erasmo looked like me. He’d stolen my former life. He’d taken my wife and children. They had to be here somewhere.

After a long climb, a door waited above. It looked heavy. Part of me wished to throw my shoulder against it and batter it down. The wiser part, the cunning part, slowed, stopped and soon tested it. It was open. I pushed ever so slowly.

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The room was huge. It contained rugs, cushioned chairs and an open hearth in the center. Black coals and ashes smoldered there now. There were cabinets with wine and decanters. There were tables with spiced chicken, apples, pears, ham, meat pies and cakes. Plates lay on tables. Greasy bones lay on those, hunks of bread and half-filled glasses. There had been a feast, a party maybe.

A lone occupant rose from the head of one of the tables. He set a gnawed bone on the silken tablecloth. He was hairy, eight feet tall and had clawed hands. It was the chief of the lycanthropes in human form. A long blue cloak hung at his back. It was fastened near his hulking shoulder with a sapphire flower of exotic design. His green eyes were hot and poisonous, and greedy for pain. He tilted his face, and he sniffed.

“You’ve been with the sea creatures,” he said.

“I was in Perugia. Do you remember?”

He shrugged.

“You feared me then,” I said. “Your brothers of the fang said I was a dead thing.”

“We feared you before you ran from us. We fear nothing that runs away.”

“I won’t run now. Go ahead and call your brother.”

He sniffed again, more carefully. A slow smile stretched his lips. “You made a mistake coming here,” he said. “You lack silver weapons.”

I kicked the door shut and dropped the bar. “Do you remember the smile I gave your brother when I cut under his chin?”

He picked up a sword, a whippy, flexible thing over five feet long. It looked sharp, deadly. I’d never seen a sword like that. It had a jeweled pommel.

“This is how we duel in my world,” he said. “Tonight, I gain rank in the civilized manner.”

“You?” I asked. “Civilized? Is that a jest?”

He slashed the sword. The tip whipped back and forth with deadly swishes. He hurled his chair from him and stepped away from the table.

“Erasmo della Rovere has style,” he said. “He is a superior being. He ordered a proper sword forged for a true warrior. With it, I will cut out your heart and give him half. The other half I’ll gnaw. I will thereby gain your strength.”

“You’ll need it.”

“I will hew your head with a swipe. I will pack your head in salt and take it with me when I return home. There I will let the pups piss on your face and I will tell them the story about how I slew the killer-in-the-dark.”

I spread my hands and moved toward him. “I have no five-foot sword,” I said. “How civilized is that?”

He flicked the sword, and the tip swished several feet either way. “It is alive,” he said. “Notice the movement, the backsnap. In our world, such a sword is called a *tschai*. I tell you this so you may understand the honor I do you.”

I frowned. I didn’t want his honor. I wanted to kill Erasmo, save my family. The lycanthrope stood in the way.

“You crossed to the fiery world after us,” he said. “That was brave. I salute you.”

He made an exaggerated flourish. It would have been comical in another place. His green eyes glittered. The teeth in his smile were long and canine-like. The blue cloak, the exotic sapphire flower, what did he try to prove?

“You have been clever,” he said.

I dipped my head. Maybe in his own way he was a knight.

“Now you may die,” he said. “Now I will gain your soul, killer-in-the-dark. You are mine.”

His muscles tensed. He slid his feet toward me, passed the hearth and stalked between the cushioned chairs. He had reach with that long sword, whatever he had called it. He had reach with those long arms. He would be fast. The chief of the lycanthropes was greater than any mere altered man. He was a giant. He ignored normal weapon cuts. I did not have time to duel, to complete his ceremony. I had to stop the end of the world.

He howled, leaped, and thrust his twitchy sword.

I threw my deathblade. It sank to the hilt in his throat. The point stuck out of his neck. He gurgled. He blinked once, and he took a step closer. Then the five-foot blade crashed to the floor. He followed it.

I hurried, and I hacked off his head and threw it across the room. I did not do it as an act of savagery. I did not do it for revenge. I did it because I feared his recuperative powers. He was a lycanthrope, a strange creature of myth. The decapitation honored him-in a way. I think he might have understood.

I raced for the stairs on the other end of the room, and I continued to climb.

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The top must have finally been near. After yet another circuit around the tower on these spiral stairs, I heard voices. They murmured. They sounded worried.

Voices equaled more than one, maybe many. I stowed the bag, straightened my clothes and gave them a quick brush. The busts had given me an idea. I settled my hood to insure it hid my features. Only then did I continue, now in a stately stride.

I passed an open door and entered a circular room. A widow admitted fiery light from the gargantuan flames in the sky. Braziers glowed with red embers. Bizarre etchings and lurid figures decorated the walls. The floor was a giant mosaic. The symbols surely held magical significance. In the center of the room was an ebon altar. A nude and terrified beauty lay upon it. Shackles held her ankles and wrists.

The murmuring stopped as I entered. There were several clumps of apprentices. They wore long, scarlet robes tied by yellow cords. Each bore ugly scars on his face, burn marks. I realized then that each mark had a counterpart on the wall. The burn was a magical symbol, likely branded on. Maybe the living flame had done that to each.

The sorcerer lacked facial scarring. He wore the opposite of them, a yellow robe with a scarlet cord. He had gnarled hands. He was short, bald and had the leathery face of an onion merchant. He seemed less like a sorcerer than an angry peasant. I took that to mean he was a master at his art. Maybe this was Erasmo's most trusted servant. All the apprentices were taller than the sorcerer.

"Who are you?" the sorcerer asked. His voice was hoarse. He stood near the altar beside a small table. On the table were an assortment of knives. There was another thing there, but a yellow cloth hid it.

I stood silently. I doubted he could see my features underneath the hood.

The apprentices glanced at the sorcerer. He kept his leathery face impassive.

I wondered how to imitate Erasmo, and decided the more arrogantly I acted the more convincing. So I kept staring.

The sorcerer brushed his fingertips against his thumb. "Do you bring a message?" he asked.

I could draw my knife and attempt to kill them all. Instead, I wanted answers first. There was also the possibility that the sorcerer and the apprentices knew spells that could seriously harm me. I doffed the hood, and I continued to stare at the sorcerer.

The reactions startled me. Many gasped. The apprentices to a man averted their gaze from mine. In twos and threes, they knelt. The sorcerer bowed his head and he spread his arms outward. With much huffing and puffing, he worked onto his knees.

"My lord," he said, "this is a surprise."

I remained silent. I noticed that the sacrifice on the altar had screwed her eyes shut. Maybe I should order them all to lie on their bellies. I could kill them more easily then.

"Do you wish to speak alone, my lord?" the sorcerer asked.

"Confine them all to their quarters," I said.

One apprentice groaned. Several turned chalk white. The boldest dared look up at the sorcerer with confusion.

The sorcerer hesitated. I had likely already blundered. But I couldn't back down now. I narrowed my eyes. The sorcerer stiffened, and he clapped his hands.

With their eyes downcast, the apprentices fled the room. The last shut the door with the softest snick.

I walked regally toward the sorcerer. He swallowed audibly, and his leathery skin turned pale. He began to tremble.

"My lord," he whispered, "I–I don't understand. We awaited your signal. Everything is ready."

I laughed grimly.

"The powers, lord…. What keeps them at bay? This shouldn't be possible."

"Do you think I tell you everything?" I asked.

He brushed his fingertips against his thumb. He frowned, obviously perplexed. I wished I knew what he was thinking. "My lord-*my lord*," he said. "You've shaved off your beard."

"I wondered when you would notice."

"Lord, have I failed thee?"

"Quickly," I said, "explain your part. Then you shall see how you've failed."

He lifted his head and stared. A lizard-quick moment of understanding lit in his eyes. He bowed his head. He stopped trembling and color returned to his skin. "Lord-" he began.

I was upon him before he finished. With an arm around his throat, I dragged him upright. I pressed the deathblade against his stomach. Maybe Erasmo and I used the same face, but there were surely enough minor variations and word choices that alert people could pierce the difference.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Your features are uncanny, even to the tilt of his head."

"Do you want to live?"

"Naturally," he said.

I wondered at his cool. “Then you must answer me,” I said.

“I think not.”

“Then I have no use for you.”

“Nor will you have a use for me once I tell you what you want to know.”

“One means you die now,” I said, “another later.”

“Yes,” he admitted, “that’s a problem.”

I tightened my hold, and I whispered into his ear. “I have a knife. It has cut your master before. The wounds do not heal.”

He nodded because I gripped him too tightly for him to speak.

“Your death can be hard or quick,” I said, and I eased up.

He coughed hoarsely. I let go. He bent over, coughed and began to wheeze. He massaged his throat and straightened. “You look just like him,” he said. “You should have grown a beard, though.”

“Decide!”

“If you killed anyone entering the tower,” he said, “the body will soon be discovered. Guards will sound the alarm. The apprentices will come out of their rooms. They will talk. If nothing else works, our lord will unleash the powers against you.”

“What powers?” I said.

“Look outside. They’re the giant flames.”

“What are they?”

He shook his head. “I dare not say more.”

I had no time to dicker. He was tough minded. He was evil. A woman lay on the altar, ready for him to sacrifice. How many other women had he slain with his assorted knives? If I tied and gagged him, he likely had magical abilities to free himself. He had left me no choice. I was the Darkling. To show mercy now in this desperate place was folly.

I killed him, wiped my deathblade on his yellow robe and laid him on the mosaic. I would have to question an apprentice. The sight of the dead sorcerer might help loosen his tongue. I strode for the door.

“I’ll tell you want you want to know,” the nude woman on the altar said.

I whirled around. In my haste, I’d forgotten about her.

“The keys are on the knife table,” she said. “They’re under the yellow cloth.”

I found them, freed her and ripped his robe from him. She wrapped herself with it. She was young and beautiful, blond-haired, with startling green eyes.

“I’ve listened to them talk,” she said, as she knotted the cord around her slim waist. “They’re worried because things aren’t going right.”

“Go on,” I said.

“You won’t kill me, will you?”

“No.”

“On your word?” she asked.

“On my word of honor, my lady.”

“There’s no honor here,” she said bitterly.

“I’m a prince.”

She laughed. It was a hard thing, tinged with fear. “Can you spirit me out of here?”

“Not at the moment,” I said.

“Will you come back for me once you’re done?”

“If you help me,” I said. “If it’s possible.”

She nodded. “That’s better than anyone else is offering.”

“You must hurry.”

“*Did* you kill someone getting in?”

That told me she had been listening. It also made me wary. Who was she? I could have asked her a dozen questions and still know nothing about Erasmo and his plan. Time was precious.

“I killed the chief lycanthrope and I killed this sorcerer.”

“His name was Pandolfo Petrucci,” she said.

“I don’t care what is name is. Tell me what’s going on with the spell.”

She brushed back her golden hair. For a woman just freed from an altar, she had amazing poise.

“The flames in the sky are powers, lords of another realm,” she said. “They’re supplying magical might.”

“Keep talking,” I said.

“The Grand Conjuration has been days in the making. It’s a difficult spell. I’ve been chained to this altar three different times. This makes the fourth. The Lord of Night is injured, as you said. He slowly regains strength. Everyone is readied, and then he has a relapse. When the signal finally comes, I’m to be butchered along with many others. Then the Lord of Night will summon a being powerful enough to finish the Grand Conjuration.”

“You mean blow the Trumpet of Blood.”

She shrugged. “I haven’t heard about that.”

“They didn’t talk about it?”

“Not near me.”

“Why does he need these flame powers?” I asked.

“Do you think I’m a witch?”

I grabbed her wrist and dragged her to a window. It faced the massive tower.

“How hard is it to get into there?” I asked.

She brushed back her golden hair. “I would say it’s impossible.”

“How do you know?”

She tugged the robes more tightly around herself. “It’s a hard world out there. I believed an apprentice’s promises. They might have come true. Then the Lord of Night returned hurt. He tried to hide it, but we soon knew. Well, the sorcerers and apprentices knew. That’s when the plan changed and they needed-”

She turned to me. “Do you think I’m a virgin?” she asked.

I studied the massive tower, although I avoided looking at the giant flames, the so-called powers.

“I always thought sorcerers only sacrificed virgins,” she said. “I thought I was safe. Then my lover decided here was his chance to gain influence. They all vied with each other to offer their paramours to their sorcerer. They’re all dogs. He said he loved me. Then he told me I should understand. He said he was sorry. Can you believe that?”

“Go bar the door,” I said.

She frowned. Then she got the idea and hurried across the room, with her bare feet slapping tiles.

“Wait,” I said. “I left something in the corridor.”

I retrieved my bag, and I helped her push several chests against the door.

“This isn’t going to do us much good once the spell is finished,” she said.

I strode to the window. If only the central tower stood closer. If only I had wings, I could fly into Erasmo’s window. I struck the windowsill with my fist.

“Do you have a plan?” she asked.

“Who guards that tower?”

“You won’t break into it like you did here.”

“How do you know that?”

She laughed grimly. “Why do you care how I know?” she asked.

I studied the central tower. I stared at the bright window high up there. The sorcerer here had feared seeing me. He had wondered how Erasmo could be away from his central tower, what had anchored the powers while the Lord of Night wandered. That meant Erasmo had to be up there. His being there somehow chained the powers into place.

“You’re here to kill him,” she said. “You said you cut him once. Why do you look just like him?”

In the streets below, I saw no evidence of alarm. There were no rushing bands, no sounding gong. In fact, I didn’t see anyone.

“You’ll never kill him,” she said.

Should I run down the tower stairs? The wisest course would be to chain this woman back onto the altar.

“If the spell is interrupted,” she said, “horrible things will happen. That’s what has the apprentices so worried.”

“Should I sacrifice you then?” I asked. “Should I finish the spell?”

She brushed back her golden hair. “Take me with you. We must flee this place.”

I shook my head.

“I’m nobility just like you.” She rubbed my arm and pressed herself against me. “You’ll never regret saving me. I promise to make your life a living ecstasy. I’m very good at what I do.”

That building over there, it was near the central tower. I saw a window, too, one lower down. I had to decide now what I was going to do. I had to get into the central tower fast. If I dashed down these stairs…the apprentices were ambitious want-to-be-sorcerers. Several of them would either peer out their doors or have other means of watching what went on. Word of my presence-what they thought was Erasmo’s presence here-had likely spread to everyone in the tower. I needed those wings more than ever.

“Why do feel so cold?” she asked.

I wrenched my arm loose and tore into my bag. In seconds, I wore the Darkling belt and cut my silk line in half. I assembled my crossbow, loaded a bolt and shot it into this brick windowsill. Then I attached the line to the bolt.

“You can’t climb down that,” she said.

I broke apart my crossbow.

“Where did you buy that?” she asked. “I’ve never seen one you hook together.”

I tied the other end of the line to the spindle on my belt. Then I cranked the handle fast and wound up the silk.

“That’s ingenious,” she said. “But can it hold your weight?”

I attached the bag to my belt and leaped onto the windowsill.

“Wait!” she cried. “Take me with you.”

I stared into her green eyes. Terror filled them. She was pale and trembled. I realized she had chattered endlessly because of her fear.

I knew I should simply jump out. Then I wondered if she might race to the table and grab a knife. Maybe enraged that I’d left her, she would cut the line. I could kill her-the fastest course. Or I could chain her back onto the altar.

“Please.” She held out her hands. “I can help you.”

“How?”

“I can show you things. Help you avoid making a mistake. Please, don’t leave me here. They’ll kill me. Torture me to find out what happened.”

I didn’t know if the silk line would hold us both, although I expected it would.

“Hold onto my neck,” I said. “If you slip, you’ll die.”

She climbed onto the windowsill. I turned. She wrapped her arms

around my neck. If I'd breathed, she probably would have choked me because she held so tightly. Then I stepped outside the window and began to unwind the spindle.

— 32-

I cut the line. Above, the flames roared with greater fire than before. Heat billowed around us and a terrible feeling of expectancy filled the castle.

Signor Orlando had brought Erasmo through to Perugia with a similar pattern as was presently laid between the towers. Now Erasmo brought something worse through to here. Orlando had burned candles. The smaller towers would burn souls, sacrifices such as the woman running beside me. It came to me then the priestess' prophecy about the Trumpet of Blood. An angel had blown it on the dead Earth, what was now a dead Earth. Maybe Erasmo lacked the power to blow the trumpet. He was still human, not an angel and probably lacked an angel's might. Maybe the flames, the powers flickering over the castle, lacked the power to sound the trumpet. What grim being could blow the Trumpet of Blood? The answer was one that took awesome magical strength to summon.

Erasmo played with the very fabric of our Earth. He would slay millions, had already slain millions, in order to gain immeasurable might. If he was still human, still mortal, he already had the appetite of a god.

"We must get inside," the woman said. "It's forbidden now for anyone to be out. It might anger the powers. We were told they could slay us with a glance."

"Do you know where the feeding area is to for the sea monsters?"

"That way," she said, pointing.

"Go there."

"Alone?" she asked.

We stood in the shadows of a two-storey barracks. A road was nearby. If I squinted, I could see haze, haze that moved along the road. That was magical power. It pumped like blood between the towers. Did the powers above supply that?

"Where does Erasmo keep his wife and children?" I asked.

"They're likely in the central tower with him," she said. "Why, are you going to kill them, too?"

"Wait here," I said.

I ran from her, and I crossed a road. It made my teeth ache. The woman followed. She screamed. It was a pitiful sound. She stood frozen in the road. I hesitated. Her skin began to shrivel. She seemed incapable of moving, although she implored me with her eyes. I dashed back, endured the awful ache, grabbed her hand and yanked her off the road.

She gasped. Her hair was soaked. Perspiration caused the yellow

robe to cling to her skin.

I pulled her to another building. She collapsed against it. She panted, and she drew up her knees and hugged herself. She brushed back lank hair and gave me a brave smile.

"Listen to me," I said. "You must run to where they feed the sea monsters. I killed the guard there. It should be safe. I'll take you with me before I leave. But you must stay where I know you're safe."

"You'll truly come back for me?" she asked in a small voice.

"I swear, madam, as the former prince of Perugia."

She touched my arm. "My name is Ippolita Conti. And I meant what I said before. You'll be very glad you saved me."

Then she heaved herself onto her feet, and ran for the sea monster's building.

I arose and headed for the building near the central tower.

***

The altered men in this three-storey building huddled in terror. I found that out when I smashed through the front door. They whined and shrank back. One barked at his brethren. They rose half-heartedly and snatched their axes. I slew them, four in this room and three in the next. I took the stairs. On this pregnant night, other altered men behind other locked doors wisely remained where they were.

I had the feeling there were other things than altered men in the central tower, the monstrosity that reached for the stars. Maybe the flame powers would interfere. Maybe Signor Orlando stood guard there.

I flipped up a trapdoor and hurried across the roof to the edge nearest the tower. Orange, red and purple colors flickered upon me. The fiery cackles sounded like a storm. I thought then to hear shrieks. The noises came from the roads. Foolishly, I glanced at the nearest one. The haze had solidified into something more ghastly. They looked like ghosts, wraiths in agony. Many shrieked. Many twisted their faces into painful masks. They flew along the road, hundreds in the same direction. Some resisted to no avail.

Were they yet more sacrifices to Erasmo's ambitions? If I had left Ippolita Conti on the road, would her soul have joined the evil pilgrimage? Why could I withstand what had almost slain her?

I hooked my skeletal crossbow together. I selected a bolt and tied the line to it. The tower loomed above. The crisscross of roads below might tax even my strength crossing each in turn. There was a window across from me, to the side and a little above. Just how good was a Darkling?

My lips peeled back. It was hot, and the roar in my ears threatened my confidence. I knelt, sighted and squeezed the trigger. The bolt sped hard, and it drilled into the tower. Once it hit, the bolt

popped out spines to anchor itself into place. I tugged. The line held… for now. I drilled my last bolt into the edge of my building. Then I unhooked the crossbow and stuffed it into my bag, hooked the bag to the belt and knelt once more. I tied the line to this bolt. I made it snug.

I was the Darkling. I was the master assassin. I was insane, and I knew it. High up on the tower-impossibly high-Erasmo's window blazed with light. Maybe he chanted even now. This was the final lap. With the roar of flames in my ears, I stepped onto the silken line. Then I began to tightrope-walk across.

***

The riot of changing colors threatened to disorient me. That the roars of the giant flames began to transform into words almost shattered my concentration.

I'd always possessed wonderful balance. It had helped my swordplay and while thundering with a couched lance. I'd seen before in my days as prince trained acrobats and jugglers. Their more daring tricks had delighted and amazed me. I'd never walked across a tightrope before. I would never have thought to try as a prince. It was the last time in Perugia, while slithering across the rotted roofs that I'd learned about this particular Darkling ability. My balance was better than good. It had become fantastic.

The silken line quivered. It swayed because I hadn't tightened it enough. I raised my arms to either side. I shifted, bent my knees and bit my lower lip. Through it all, I advanced one foot ahead of the other.

The ghostly road-lines seethed with movement below. It was a caldron, a raging river of souls. The powers above thundered words. Some of the words seemed addressed at me. Others seemed aimed at the open window high above. The words were in an alien language, maybe one that demons spoke to each other. I expected a flame hand to come and scoop me up. I cringed at the thought of fire licking down from the sky and shriveling me into a blackened corpse.

The heat became unbearable. Greasy droplets oozed from my skin. It wasn't normal sweat. It felt like an oven. My boot slipped-

I balanced on one leg. The line quivered. I swayed. My inhuman strength helped. I set down my other boot, slid it ahead and continued as before. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to scream. I yearned to sink my blade into Erasmo della Rovere.

Soon the window loomed near. The shutters were closed. They looked locked. It wasn't Erasmo's high window near the top of this colossal tower, but one of several dotted throughout the tower's length. A sill afforded less than a foot of ledge, about two feet long. Wet pigeon guano stained it. The terrible heat had kept it soft, maybe

semi-liquefied it. Unfortunately, my bolt had drilled to the side and a little below the window.

I refused to shake my head, refused to worry. I put one foot ahead of the next. The line's sway had lessened now. It had almost stopped quivering.

I don't know what I expected. Maybe the window to open and three goat-men packed in a bunch to fire crossbows bolts into me. The bolts would sprout from my chest and I would plunge down into the river of screaming souls. Yes, I heard them now. It was a terrible sound. There was also a mulching sound, like great knives slicing and dicing spirits. Shrieks came from there. I refused to glance down. I concentrated on the window.

Flame words boomed. They were questions. I foolishly looked up. One purple flame glared at me. He bent lower, and a flame arm appeared at his side. He began to reach for me.

I had no more time. I ran five times on the rope. It bounced at each step. I have no idea how I kept my balance. Then I leaped as the line gave me extra fling. I sailed toward the ledge. The flame hand kept descending. My fingers touched the guano-wet ledge. Slipped! Luckily, I yet flew upward. My shoulder brushed the locked shutters. I shot my hand through it like an uppercut. Wood splintered. My hand grabbed the inner bar. I flopped against the guano-stained ledge. The flame hand roared in its downward passage. Heat blazed against me. I grabbed the bar, and with my other hand smashed more wood. Then I yanked myself within the tower. Outside the flame hand slapped against bricks.

Altered men howled within the large room. It appeared to be a guardroom with tables, dice and cards. Strange, beastly men wore steel breastplates and held pikes. Many had crossbows. The clothes on my back burst into flame. My moon-cloak smoldered. It was worse for the altered men. They didn't have my Darkling flesh. Their hair singed and curled. Some caught fire. All of them screamed and howled in misery. Crossbow strings parted. Flesh burned and stank like pork.

I ran. I dashed into the throng of them. Altered men bounced from me and tumbled onto the floor. Tables burst into flame. I smashed through their ranks and charged for the open door. Behind me, a gigantic flame-finger entered the window. It wriggled, and everything in the room roared with fire. That cut off the altered men's screams, the howls and shrieks. A dark cloud of stink billowed after me.

I bounded up stairs. I outraced the licking flames and I ripped burning clothes off me. The back of my legs and back were agony, although the moon-cloak and boots had protected me so that I was still alive.

Time. I had no time left. I had to reach Erasmo now. The Tower of the East, this central tower, was bigger than any construct I'd ever seen. Even with my greater strength, I could not simply run up the spiral length of stairs. It would exhaust my moon-given energies. Therefore, I slowed to a brisk pace. I examined my burns.

In places, the back of my thighs had blistered. None of the skin had blackened or charred. It was like a terrible sunburn. It hurt, but I could still move. I still had my strength. I would have to endure. I'd been a knight before I ever became a prince.

The stairs went round and round. They were of stone. I thought about Ippolita Conti. I thought about Ofelia, the priestess and Anaximander. I recalled my sweet Francesca shouting for her daddy. Carlo da Canale fought with White Company mercenaries. He was a brave man caught in a horrible world. That world would become much worse if Erasmo's summoning blew the Trumpet of Blood.

The three lycanthropes had entered our Earth in empty Velluti. Did the last lycanthrope wait above for me? Did Erasmo use him as a guard? What about Signor Orlando Furioso? The black knight had his magic sword Durendal. Poets said that Durendal could slice through any armor. My Darkling skin was harder than normal skin, but it wasn't tougher than steel plate. I hoped the lycanthrope was outside fighting Hawkwood. Even more, I hoped Signor Orlando thought it beneath his dignity, as Charlemagne's formerly greatest knight, to stand guard to a wicked conjurer.

I checked my weapons. I had the deathblade, and an extra knife taken off an octo-man. I had several howlers and a sectioned blowpipe with poisoned darts. My skeletal crossbow was out of bolts. It was too bad I couldn't have picked up extra bolts in the guardroom.

Maybe I'd better be satisfied that I was still alive.

Where had Erasmo found the flame powers? Did it please Old Father Night if the flame powers were from elsewhere? It seemed to me that Old Ones would hate new competitors for men's fear. I wondered then if Old Father Night wanted Erasmo to blow the Trumpet of Blood.

My lips drew back. How much did I have to understand? Erasmo had lured me to Avernus. Everything went back to that. He would now pay with his life, and I would finally see Laura, Francesca and Astorre.

I paused, and I looked upward. The stairs went forever. There would be others waiting. It wouldn't be that easy to kill my childhood friend.

I resumed the brisk pace. Stair after stair, stone after stone, I ascended upward. Did Erasmo know I was coming? The flame powers would probably tell him. Would Erasmo care? Yes, he would care. The

cuts on his flesh would throb with memory. I hoped he knew it was me. I hoped his flesh crawled with fear, with terror. I hope the old wound in his foot hurt.

"Erasmo!" I shouted. "I'm almost there. I'll gut you this time! I'll stab you in the heart. There's no escaping my vengeance, you traitor!"

— 33-

I would not be able to duplicate the knife-trick I'd used against the chief of the lycanthropes. Signor Orlando wore armor, with a steel *gorget* around his neck.

I'd climbed far, almost all the way. From outside the tower came roaring sounds and peals of thunder. The walls trembled. The floor shifted with a grind of stones. Signor Orlando sat beside a table. Behind him were ornate double doors. On either side of our room were barred shutters. They rattled at every thunderous crash.

The black knight rested his armored elbow on the table. He held a goblet and sipped wine. A flagon was open, the cork beside it. His black helm lay on the table beside iron gauntlets. Near them lay his sheathed sword, the famed Durendal.

"So you defeated the dog," he said in his deep voice.

He had white skin, the whitest I'd ever seen. The eyes were all red, although there was a hint of darker red pupils. He had high cheekbones and black hair. Once, women might have found him handsome. He had too many scars now, a battlefield on his face. It wasn't quite brutality I saw there. Long ago, he had been the world's greatest knight. Maybe he had fought too long, killed too many foes. The stamp of the killer permeated him. I wondered if even the Darkling could defeat the black knight, Orlando Furioso. Was he mad? He did not seem crazy.

"He's destroying our world," I said.

A tight smile stretched those battles-scarred lips. He poured himself more wine.

I eased onto my toes and then settled back onto my heels. Could my deathblade pierce his armor? Was it enchanted? Maybe I could walk away, assemble my blowpipe and pepper his face with poisoned darts. I should have already assembled it.

"You're a persistent bugger," he said.

"I almost had him on the dead Earth. You walked away from the cave, remember?"

"Killing him there would have been bad for all of us," he said.

"It would have saved our Earth."

Orlando shook his head. "The Earth is finished like an old whore. The other Lords of Night all have plans. Erasmo just happens to be the first to try his."

"Why do you protect him?" I asked.

He patted Durendal, and for a moment, something else appeared on his face. Maybe it was a lost memory of honor.

"How does blowing the trumpet help you find Angelica?" I asked.

He tilted his head as if he found me strange. The all-red eyes became unsettling. I saw his ruthlessness. He killed like other men ate food.

Maybe it was senseless, this line of inquiry. I yearned to sink my deathblade into Erasmo. I didn't want to fight Signor Orlando, the greatest knight of Charlemagne's glittering empire. I'd been raised on tales of Orlando. How was it he still lived? Where had he acquired his strange eyes? Could he be like me? The red eyes and his practice of spells in Perugia pointed to evil changes. Maybe he was no longer human, but altered in some nefarious manner.

"Angelica died a long time ago," I said. "You know that."

He stared at the goblet, and he drained it.

"Stand aside, signor," I said. "Let me send the spell-casting cur to the place he belongs."

"No."

Maybe there was another reason I spoke with Orlando. I feared him. I admit it. It was long into the night. I'd done much and used much of my moon-given strength. The flame powers stood in the way of the moon: somehow blocked its normally healing rays. I wished to bypass Orlando so I had something left to slay Erasmo with.

"What more do you gain by your post?" I asked. "You have your sword, but-"

"Don't say her name again," he told me. His face was like granite.

I said, "What other reward does he-"

Orlando Furioso rose abruptly. He picked up his helm. He weighed it. Then he set the helm on his head. He put on the gauntlets, and with the slide of steel, he drew Durendal. It was a big sword, meant to bash through armor. It was a battleblade and it shone strangely.

"You probably talked the dog to death." His voice echoed within the helm. "With me, you must fight."

"I would rather not fight you, signor."

"Then scurry back to your hole."

"Look at my face," I said.

He shrugged. "So you look like Erasmo. That's a parlor trick."

"I am Gian Baglioni. He has masqueraded as me. He has stolen my wife and children. Yes! He took my Angelica from me."

"Soil my lady's name again with your lips and I will cut you down, signor."

"You're a bitter man."

"I am the eternal mercenary," he said.

"You've bound yourself to a demon."

"Who," he said, "is soon to become a god."

Thunder boomed outside. The tower rumbled. Beads of rubble

dribbled from the ceiling. One line of it showered onto the table, sounding like sand.

I drew my deathblade, and I drew the octo-man's knife. They were pitiful weapons compared to Durendal, compared to knightly armor. He stood poised, the battleblade held in both his gauntleted hands. I'd lost the majority of my clothes, which had burned off. I had my moon-cloak, boots, belt and knives. The deathblade was long and perfectly balanced, almost two feet of oily steel. The octo-man's dagger was shorter, although wickedly sharp. Under normal circumstances, I would never dare try to parry the battleblade directly. That was my one advantage. He was armored and armed for battle. Durendal had been forged for use among the press of warriors. We were about to duel. The armor would slow him, maybe only fractionally. Yet I needed that fraction. I needed something, some edge. The armor gave him an advantage another way. Any glancing cut would hurt me. I didn't even know if either of my knives could punch through his armor. That was the problem. I would have to punch my point into his armor. He needed only nick me to cut. To punch the deathblade into him, I had to get past Durendal, past the magic sword. I had to get under his guard. Not only that, but I had to commit myself. To punch a dagger into armor, maybe enchanted armor, I would have to set myself. In a fight like this, that left you vulnerable. That gave him time to react and possibly hack into a relatively stationary target.

I crouched like a knife-fighter and shuffled toward him. He laughed, and he attacked with a short chop.

The next few moments laid out the parameters of the fight. He thrust and cut in perfect arcs, never over-committing, never leaving himself vulnerable. I danced back, shifted, twisted, deflected with my knives and backed away once more. I made certain to back away in a curve, to insure there was always more room behind me. If he backed me against a wall or into a corner, I would be dead.

Whenever the deathblade and Durendal touched, sparks erupted, steel clinked. The other knife soon looked like a saw-blade, and that had occurred at the slightest meeting of blades.

Then Orlando pivoted on his left foot. Durendal licked toward my face. I ducked and parried with the octo-man dagger. The magic steel sliced through the ordinary metal. The saw-like blade clattered onto the floor and I was left holding an empty hilt.

"You're quick like a wasp," he said. "But in the end I'll swat you down."

I leaped away, overturned the table and picked up the chair he'd sat on. I lifted it as a buckler. I was faster, but not fast enough to set and punch the deathblade into his armor. The moment I tried that,

Durendal would hack me down. I dreaded trying to parry his heavy blade with my mine. To deflect, to shift away his sword, yes, to utterly stop a two-handed swing against me-I wondered if it would snap my knife in two.

Outside, thunder boomed with ferocious sounds. The walls groaned and swayed. Rubble rained, some against Orlando's armor. The shutters rattled, one insanely. Then the wood splintered and blew inward.

I threw myself flat onto the floor. Wooden shards hit like arrows against Orlando. He staggered backward.

Outside the wind shrieked. Flames writhed and heat poured into our room. Thunder boomed again, and the flames changed colors with bewildering rapidity. Then darkness shrouded that.

"Is this what you're protecting?" I shouted.

"Once he's a god, he will bring me Angelica! Can you fathom that? After all these centuries, after all this time, I will have her. She escaped me once, and I was damned for it. Yes! I will protect a thousand lords of Night if it brings me my woman. She will be mine!"

Orlando Furioso gripped Durendal two-handed and stalked toward me. His red eyes blazed with wrath.

I backed toward the open window. For how many centuries had Orlando dealt death? He meant to deal it now to me. I felt a strange surge of warmth on my back then. It felt good. It felt like ambrosia. I didn't dare to turn and see why it was so, although I could guess.

"Wait!" I shouted. "I–I think you're right."

The red eyes blazed wrath between the bars of his helmet. I was afraid that he was beyond reason.

"What if I lay down my knife?" I shouted.

He stopped. "You surrender?" he asked, and he sounded disappointed.

I heard chanting. It came from outside, and it came from above. The flame powers no longer roared with fire. Their kaleidoscope of lights no longer flickered. I think they were gone. I did not check. Instead, I felt the moon's rays bathe my sore, burned body and renew my energies. I needed time, time to absorb the healing rays, time to rethink my strategies. I believe I understood what had happened. The flame powers had done their task, and they had departed. I don't think they wanted to be around when the being Erasmo summoned arrived in the Tower of the East.

"Listen," I said. "You can hear him."

Orlando cocked his helmeted head.

We both heard Erasmo chanting in the room above. We heard through our broken window. The voice was hoarse and weary. I had the terrible feeling that Erasmo was near the end of the great spell.

Surely he held the Trumpet of Blood.

"Soon," whispered Orlando. He shifted toward me.

"You won't take my surrender?"

"The day you set out to kill Erasmo della Rovere, you were a dead man." Orlando Furioso clanked nearer. He held Durendal two-handedly. He had finally backed me against a wall.

The open window, the departed powers and the resurgent moon gave me my single chance. Yet I hesitated. I didn't know the extent of Durendal's power. I dreaded its magic, the eerie glow along the blade. I could not defeat Signor Orlando in a fair fight. He was the better warrior. I, however, was the Darkling. He stood in the way of my freeing Laura, of my touching Francesca once more. He guarded Erasmo.

I lunged. I put all my hopes on a single thrust of my knife. It was the opposite of how I'd fought so far.

Orlando chopped hard. Durendal shattered the stool I used as a shield. The sword kept coming, and the blade sank into my hip. It grated against bone. It staggered me and the pain exploded with fiery intensity.

Yet in that instant, with almost all my weight on my right leg, my right hip, I punched the deathblade. I had gotten inside his guard by paying the price of receiving Durendal's edge in my flesh. The deathblade's point screamed as it touched his armor. The armor resisted and then it parted. The oily blade entered his gut. It sank to the hilt. Then the force of Durendal cutting into me hurled me aside. I lost my hold of the deathblade and crumpled upon the floor.

The black knight stumbled backward and slammed against the wall. It was a clank of noise. The sword Durendal crashed down onto the floor. Signor Orlando wrapped a gauntleted hand around the hilt of the deathblade. He yanked. He groaned. The blade came out. So did smoke, and then torrents of dark blood.

"Ah, but that hurts," he said.

I crawled to the open window. Sluggish fluid poured out my hip. I let moonbeams fall on it. That leeched some of the hurt, and almost immediately, the flow lessened.

"You'll never make it now," Orlando gasped as he leaned against the wall. He'd torn off his helm. His face had the pallor of death. Smoke trickled from his mouth as he spoke. Then his eyes narrowed. He studied me, how moonlight fell across my hip.

"You're healing," he whispered.

"I'm the Darkling."

He groaned as he bent down, groped and then lifted Durendal. He took a horrible, lurching step toward me. He raised the sword, and his eyelids flickered.

I judged the distance to my deathblade.

"You didn't fight fair," he said. He slid an armored foot toward me, and he moaned. Blood stained his teeth. Smoke billowed from the stomach wound. He was dying on his feet. "Dog," he whispered. He lowered his sword, and he began to swing it like a boy swinging a bucket of water. Then, with a howl of agony, he pitched Durendal.

I flinched. The sword sailed over me and out the window.

"It's my sword," he whispered. "No one else shall ever use it." Then he crashed upon the floor, dead.

I lay there for a time. The bleeding stopped, and I heard the Moon Lady whisper in my mind. I groaned as I worked to my feet. I limped to the deathblade, sheathed it and glanced at the black knight.

"It wasn't fair," I whispered. "It never is against a man who is already dead." Then I limped for the double doors.

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Rubble and giant chunks of masonry blocked my way. What had happened up there? Had the spell failed? Had Erasmo killed himself? I felt cheated, but his death-

I heard him. He still chanted. His voice was hoarse. He sounded old.

I grabbed a huge boulder of masonry and heaved. It rolled away, but other huge chunks blocked the way. It would take hours to clear them.

I retreated into the room. The window was the only way. Despite my wound, I limped to it and looked up. Stone blocks had moved. The roof was gone. The air stirred, but not with shrieks or with thunderous booms. A mist drifted before the moon and the stars. Far below were the castle grounds, the low buildings. Nothing surged along the patterned roads now. They were empty of spirits. Maybe the spell had already devoured them.

I climbed out the window. I reached up, found a wedge of space because of the moved stones and dared crawl out onto the gargantuan tower. The air stirred my cloak. It was not a boom of sound, yet the gentle stir terrified me more than the flame powers had. The stir, the gentle sound, almost the still breeze-if there was such a thing-carried more threat than the sea monsters. The being came. The one Erasmo summoned approached. I felt it. Maybe the whole world did. It was like being in the eye of a hurricane.

I slithered up the Tower of the East like a lizard. I would have liked to soak more moonbeams. Time had run out on that. I had what I had. I must move. I must attack.

A hoarse laugh sounded. It was Erasmo. “Come,” he said. “I have summoned thee. You must come and obey my commands.”

I climbed. Throughout all those booms and sorcery, the tower had shifted. Stones groaned even now, unbalanced stones held in place by weight. They ached to be free.

I reached an opening into the dread chamber. The roof had vanished. Only half the walls stood. On the floor, rubble and stones lay across glowing lines of power. The Trumpet of Blood stood on a golden stand. It gleamed silvery pure one moment and wetly red like blood the next. The stand and trumpet were outside the pattern of lines. Erasmo stood in the very center of the pattern. He stood straight in his blue jacket and golden boots. He was big like me, had an oiled beard and hard eyes. A sword hung from his belt. Costly rings decorated his fingers. He wore a black amulet, but this time it lacked a fire. Maybe it had left with the flame powers.

Ah. Blood stained his shoulder. The one I had cut in the dead world. Blood soaked his side. He coughed, and he smiled. He raised his arms. The left one he raised gingerly. A grimace of pain twitched across his face.

"I feel you," he said. "I order you to show yourself. It is time to begin my transformation."

I wriggled through the opening in the wall. It scraped my skin. Maybe he heard the sound. As I jumped to the floor, he turned. Amazement filled his face.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked.

I ran fingers through my hair. Here he was. Here was the object of my hatred. The thirst to kill him made me giddy.

"Why do you wear my likeness?" he asked.

I barely swallowed a bray of laughter. His likeness, why did I wear *his* likeness? Why did he wear mine?

I strode toward the Trumpet of Blood.

"Do you mock me?" Erasmo asked.

I ignored him.

He flexed his ringed fingers. "You must obey me this night," he said. "You are bound to me. I am the master. You are the slave."

I stopped, not because of any power of his. I realized that he thought I was the creature he had summoned.

"Face me," Erasmo said.

I faced him.

"You will explain to me why you wear my likeness," he said.

"Where are your wife and children?" I asked.

"Do you jest?" he asked.

"First you must-"

"Gian!" he said. "You're Gian."

"Where's Laura?"

"You must leave," Erasmo said. "I sent Laura and Francesca away. They're with Anaximander."

I snarled, and took a step toward him.

"I sent them to another realm," Erasmo said. "If you hope to see them again, you must obey me."

"Where's Astorre?"

Erasmo shook his head. "Your son was stubborn. He tried to kill me. He died because of it."

"You killed my son?"

"Think carefully, Gian. Anaximander has your wife and daughter. Only I know where he went. You must leave now. You must depart if you love them."

I drew the deathblade. I crossed the first of his many lines. I entered the pattern. "I am the Darkling, Erasmo. You tried to kill me,

twice now. It's my turn."

He drew his sword, and he shouted wildly. I ran and smashed my hand against his and sent the blade skittering across the room.

"This is interesting."

Erasmo and I turned. There, across the lines and near the Trumpet of Blood, stood a shimmering being. His features were handsome one moment and devilish the next.

"Sound the trumpet!" Erasmo screamed. "Hurry! Do as I command!"

The shimmering being frowned. His arm lifted toward the trumpet. The arm seemed to move on its own accord.

The being said, "This is a hard thing you ask."

"I order you!" Erasmo shouted. "I ask nothing, but demand it."

I cracked my knuckles across Erasmo's face. He struggled. I hit him again, and I had a moment of terrible inspiration.

I shouted, "Demon!"

The shimmering being looked at me, and he kept his features ugly.

I shoved Erasmo. He gave a bloodcurdling scream and staggered across the lines of the pattern. I'd shoved hard. Erasmo staggered and he flailed his arms.

The demon, or whatever he was, caught Erasmo. "This is *very* interesting," the demon said with a malignant grin.

"Please," Erasmo sobbed.

"I release you back to wherever you came," I shouted. "Begone."

"No!" Erasmo screamed, "no, no, anything but that. Don't let him take me."

"Now we shall see who orders whom, my little sorcerer," the demon said. He made an imperious gesture, lifted Erasmo and walked through a hazy portion of air. The air closed. The demon, and Erasmo della Rovere, were gone.

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My shoulders sagged. He was gone. Erasmo was gone from this world. He went to whatever Hell the thing he'd summoned had came from. I knew the legends of demons and sorcerers and what happened to sorcerers who improperly summoned them. The lines of protection, the magical pattern, kept the sorcerer safe from demonic retribution. To break the pattern or step out of it while the demon remained always spelled a horrible doom.

What was a demon but a fallen angel? Erasmo had needed an angel to blow the Trumpet of Blood. What did he care the status of said angel? The power was the thing.

Erasmo was gone. And he had sent Laura and Francesca to another place with Anaximander.

The tower swayed. Stones groaned.

What had Ippolita Conti told me? Ah. Once Erasmo died, the Tower of the East would fall apart. That was part of my last minute inspiration. To see and feel Erasmo die in my arms, oh, I'd yearned for that. Yet to achieve that meant I would've had to die with him. Could I survive the tower's destruction? I had not believed so.

The Tower of the East had stood when Erasmo had crossed to the doomed Earth before. Surely the tower would stand now as the demon took him elsewhere. Demons were demonic, masters of torture. I did not think the demon would simply snuff out Erasmo's life. That meant the tower would stand, maybe long enough for me to make my escape.

I stumbled to the trumpet. What should I do with it? If someone blew it…a third of the world's green grasses would burn up.

I picked up the trumpet. It was heavy, and it gave my arm a strange sensation. For a moment, I had the insane desire to set my lips to it and attempt to blow. I smothered the desire. I put the trumpet in my bag. Then I hurried to an open edge and slid my legs over. It was time to flee before the tower came crashing down. It was time to get Ippolita Conti.

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I waded deep into the Adriatic Sea. I'd trudged for nights. Each day I'd stopped. It was cold down here in the depths. I hated it. Moonbeams struggled to reach this far.

I stopped. I had no idea where exactly I stood. What I mean is that I doubted I could ever retrace my steps to this exact spot again. I scooped mud. I scooped a long time. Then I opened my bag and took out the dread Trumpet of Blood. I set it in the hole and for a long time shoved the mud back. I buried the terrible trumpet in some nameless spot in the Adriatic Sea.

I thought of something to say. Rather, I thought of some grand thought to think. Nothing came. I turned ninety degrees and began to walk toward the east shore of Italy.

I'd killed Erasmo della Rovere, or I had as good as killed him. I'd taken Ippolita Conti to Carlo da Canale for safety.

I walked underwater through a forest of seaweeds. I would find where Anaximander had taken my wife and daughter. I find that place and then I would go there and rescue them. I knew that I would do this thing, for I was once the prince of Perugia, Gian Baglioni, and I was the Darkling.